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**“Lest after preaching to others I become disqualified”
Grace and Warning in Paul’s Gospel
(1 Corinthians 9:23-27)**

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Introduction

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Viewed from various angles, some segments of Scripture appear more like blood-soaked battlefields than portions of God’s Holy Word. Few are Christians long before they acquire some knowledge of various Scripture passages that seem to excite visceral reactions that, if unchecked, meteorically escalate into theological battles. One passage that readily ignites human passions of conflicting beliefs is 1 Corinthians 9:27. With the emergence of a new generation in the church, theological conflicts over the meaning of this passage do not

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seem to be abating. Disputes over the meaning of the passage persist as a matter of course, given the biases and assumptions that tend to prejudice people's reading of the passage.

That we all bring biases with us when we read the Scriptures no one can reasonably dispute. We all read the Bible from a point of view that needs continually to adjust to the meaning that resides in Scripture. Lamentably, more frequently than we are eager to admit, we tend to read biblical passages through our uncorrected prejudices with the result that we find the text saying what we want it to say. We tend to manipulate the words and phrases and clauses of the biblical text to fit our preconceptions and prejudiced theological beliefs. Unless any of us can boast that sin no longer has any tarnishing effect upon our thinking, not to mention our behavior, we all must admit, to our own shame, that we never completely escape sin's corrosive toll upon our reading the Scriptures and upon our giving proper expression to God's Word, especially concerning passages that stir passionate beliefs. Nevertheless, we must never yield to this predicament as though our quest for accurate and truthful understanding of Scripture, including hotly contested passages, were forever doomed to failure so that while we quest for truth we will never actually attain unto the knowledge of the truth. In this therapeutic and postmodern culture, we must never yield to the notion that confuses confident conclusions concerning disputed passages with arrogance or confounds informed instructional commentary with a polemical demeanor.

We must always strive to correct our impaired vision so that we might read the biblical text for what it truly says and that we might be corrected by Scripture rather than presume to correct Scripture. Such is my endeavor as I seek to demonstrate that if we correctly understand the apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:27, we will recognize that his passage functions to caution himself first but also every believer lest we presume that God's grace, which we proclaim in the gospel, will save us despite failing to bring our own bodies into subjection to the holy requirements of the good news that we preach and believe. We will understand that Paul administers this warning to himself and to us without simultaneously calling upon us to doubt that God will preserve us, his children, safely to the end but might relinquish his grasp upon us with the result that we will perish in the

Last Day. Instead of subverting his own and our confident assurance that God, who has begun his work of redeeming grace in us, will preserve us in his grace to the end, Paul's warning is wholly compatible with his affirmations of confidence in God's preserving his own people unto final salvation. Precisely because the apostle believes in the power of God's redeeming grace to secure his children, Paul is also confident that warnings for him and for us are essential to the gospel's call upon us. As it is indispensable in a foot race not only to leap from the starting blocks but also to run steadfastly to the goal, so God's saving grace, announced to us in the gospel, beckons us with urgency to run faithfully to the end after we have left the starting blocks of initial belief. If we do not run faithfully, we will fail to attain unto the prize, the eternal wreath of life everlasting. By means of warnings, such as we hear in 1 Corinthians 9:27, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ reiterates the inseparable continuity between the beginning of belief in Christ Jesus and obtaining salvation that awaits us at the finish line. The continuity of belief that lays hold of eternal life in the Last Day runs through the travails, the troubles, the tribulations of this present life, both externally imposed and internally experienced, as the gospel requires faithful endurance from us in order that we might lay hold of salvation in the age to come.

Competing Interpretations of 1 Corinthians 9:27

Given the proximity of Corinth to the ancient arena in which the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympian Games in importance, were held biennially, Paul structures his appeal to the Corinthian believers, in 1 Corinthians 9:23-27, around athletic imagery.²

And I do all things on account of the gospel, in order that I might be a fellow partaker of it. Don't you know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize. Run in such a manner that you might win.

² Concerning the Isthmian Games, see J. Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1983), 14-17. Also cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2000), 10-11. Though dated, see also Erich Sauer, *In the Arena of Faith: A Call to the Consecrated Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 34-36. For further details, see Oscar Broneer, "The Apostle Paul and the Isthmian Games," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 25:1 (February 1962): 2-31; and *idem*, "Paul and the Pagan Cults at Isthmia," *Harvard Theological Review* 64 (1871): 169-187.

And everyone who competes in the arena engages in rigorous self-discipline in all things. Therefore they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we do it for an imperishable one. Therefore, I run in such a manner as not to be aimless; I box in such a manner as not to punch the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, lest after I have preached to others, I myself should be a reprobate (1 Cor 9:23-27).³

Concerning the question that tends to dominate interpretive discussions of Paul's passage, interpretations diverge in two opposing directions. Does Paul fear *that he might not persevere in salvation but perish and be lost* in perdition in the end? This is the question that tends to dominate the interests of preachers and of expositors, whether they defend or dispute an affirmative response to the question. Depending upon the answer one accepts to this question, expositors tend to fasten upon another question. Is Paul simply afraid that he might lose a reward that has nothing to do with salvation itself?⁴ There is, however, a more basic and more foundational question that needs to be posed and answered. It is the question that tends to get pushed aside and ignored. Because the passage has become the familiar battleground between two major theological traditions, we are inclined to defend the tradition we embrace rather than come afresh to the passage. The principal question that we should ask concerning Paul's passage is: What is the *function* that Paul assigns his athletic imagery in 1 Corinthians 9:23-27? Crucial as this question is, it is prudent that we identify the competing interpretations, offer a few brief comments concerning each to show the shortcomings of each, and then offer the interpretation that persuades me that best explains Paul's passage.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations of biblical passages are my own. Current editions of the Greek New Testament and of modern versions place 1 Cor 9:23 with the paragraph before. I connect verse 23 with verses 24-27 in order to preserve the coherence of Paul's concern with spiritually benefitting from the gospel he preaches.

⁴ See, e.g., Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 185. Blomberg concludes "neither one's salvation nor eternal status in heaven is at stake."

1. Loss of Eternal Salvation View⁵

The meaning of Paul's use of ἀδόκιμος has become a stone of stumbling over which many expositors sprawl in one direction or the other and then they tend to hang there and fail to address the fundamental issue posed by the passage, namely, the *function* of Paul's words. Instead, expositors tend not to get beyond the dispute whether Paul's use of ἀδόκιμος signals that he feared *loss of his own eternal salvation* or that he feared *loss of his own eternal rewards*. The starkness of the *loss of eternal salvation view* seems to incite this dispute that tends to produce more friction than illumination.

Robert Shank insists that “Paul recognized the fearful possibility of ultimately finding himself rejected, should he allow himself to become careless and indulgent toward sin.”⁶ For Shank, Paul implores the Corinthians concerning “the peril of presuming to continue to partake of Christ spiritually while consciously and deliberately embracing sin” and this peril “was real and constant” for the apostle and for the Corinthians.⁷ Thus, Paul uses ἀδόκιμος in 1 Corinthians 9:27 as he uses ἀδόκιμοι in 2 Corinthians 13:5, for after he acknowledges “his deep concern lest he should become *adokimos*, he immediately cites instances of apostasy among the Israelites.”⁸ Shank leaves no uncertainty; he insists that the apostle Paul feared rejection in the Day of Judgment and banishment to perdition.

Though he agrees with Shank that some biblical passages present the apostasy and perdition of authentic believers as possible, I. Howard Marshall finds little to support the notion that the apostle Paul expresses this possibility for himself in 1 Corinthians 9:27. Though Paul had reasons to doubt “the perseverance of some of his converts in Corinth,” he did not possess doubts concerning his own salvation, at least as expressed in our target passage.⁹ Though Marshall contends that Paul's “overwhelming feeling is one of

⁵ Some of the nomenclature used in the following portion to identify various interpretive views is the same outlined in Thomas R. Schreiner and A. B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 21-38.

⁶ Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance*, second ed. 1961 (Springfield, Missouri: Wescott, 1960), 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: Epworth; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1969), 121.

confidence regarding his own salvation,” he also understands that when Paul writes “lest after preaching to others I myself become ἀδόκιμος” the text “refers to Paul’s fear lest, having brought others to salvation, he himself should be disqualified from it,” that is, from salvation.¹⁰

2. Extra-Salvation Loss Views

The idea that Paul poses the possibility of his own failure to pass the test in the Day of Judgment and the possibility of his being cast into perdition prompts many to shudder at the prospect and leads them to theological ingenuity. The result is a variety of innovative explanations of 1 Corinthians 9:27 that contend that, while Paul fears a loss, his fear does not entail loss of salvation but rather loss of an extra-salvation reward, a reward that is in addition to his salvation which is secure. Accordingly, Paul fears only loss of an eternal reward added above and beyond salvation, loss of his testimony concerning the gospel, or loss of God’s approval of his apostleship. Each of these interpretive views, as will be shown, falls short of addressing the function of Paul’s warning athletic imagery, and in the process they generate other theological problems in their effort to avoid problems they perceive attached to the view propounded by Shank and others.

2.1. Loss of Eternal Rewards View

Those who embrace the *loss of eternal rewards view* and variations on it forge their view more in reaction against the *loss of eternal salvation view* than from the biblical text. They are confident that Paul’s expression, “lest I become ἀδόκιμος,” cannot refer to salvation itself because to believe so would contradict commitment to their doctrine of “eternal security.” Perhaps unwittingly, advocates of this view hold two beliefs in common with those who advocate the *loss of salvation view*. Both agree that the passage addresses *actual believers*. Both also agree that Paul’s warning indicates a *possible loss* for true believers. Though the two views hold these in common, they fundamentally disagree concerning what the believer can lose. One

¹⁰ Ibid. Marshall observes, “In favour of this . . . we may note that it would give a pointed contrast between ‘having preaching’ (sc. The Gospel) and ‘being disqualified.’”

contends that ἀδόκιμος refers to *loss of eternal salvation*; the other insists that ἀδόκιμος refers to *loss of eternal rewards*.

The *loss of eternal rewards* view owes its widespread popularity in large part to the impact of the notes apparatus in two places within *The New Scofield Reference Bible*. The note attached to 1 Corinthians 9:27 summarily asserts, “The apostle is writing of service, not of salvation. He is not expressing fear that he may fail of salvation but of his crowns.”¹¹ The note also directs readers to the fuller comment on 1 Corinthians 3:14, which states,

God in the N.T. Scriptures offers to the lost, salvation; and for the faithful service of the saved, He offers rewards. The passages are easily distinguished by remembering that salvation is invariably spoken of as a free gift (e.g., Jn. 4:10; Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9), whereas rewards are earned by works (Mt. 10:42; Lk. 19:17; 1 Cor. 9:24-25; 2 Tim. 4:7-8; Rev. 2:10; 22:12). A further distinction is that salvation is a present possession (Lk. 7:50; Jn. 3:36; 5:24; 6:47), whereas rewards are a future attainment, to be given at the rapture (2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 22:12).¹²

The note conveys an ostensible tone of authority and finality without any tinge of awareness concerning the egregious doctrinal miscarriage it propounds: a Protestant *doctrine of merit* with an implied Protestant *doctrine of purgatory*.¹³

¹¹ *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1241.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1235. Cf. *The Ryrie Study Bible*, NASB (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 1730. Advocates of this view repudiate the notion of meriting salvation but uphold the idea of meriting rewards.

¹³ Regularly one hears evangelical ministers, who embrace a doctrine of eternal rewards akin to that advocated in *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, propound a *doctrine of Protestant purgatory* when they portray believers who will receive shame and disapproval from the Lord at the Judgment Seat of Christ because they did not earn his approval. Robert Wilkin contends, “Paul knew that he was currently living in such a way as to merit Christ’s approval. This he could not affirm of the believers at Corinth, for there was plenty of evidence to suggest otherwise. . . . According to Paul, approval or disapproval by Christ will be based on how we live” (*Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 66).

Zane Hodges likewise argues, “It is sometimes argued that the believer’s sins cannot come under consideration at Christ’s Judgment Seat since they are all forgiven. But this confuses the two kinds of judgment. The Christian’s eternal destiny is not at issue in the judgment of believers, hence ‘sin’ as a barrier to his entrance into eternal fellowship with God is not at issue either.

“But it must be kept in mind that to review and assess a life, the Judge must consider the life in its entirety. And that obviously includes the bad with the good. . . .

“There is torment in all fear, of course. Fear, in a sense, carries its own punishment with it. Though the believer can know himself to be eternally secure, this fact does not automatically eliminate the ‘torment’ involved in anticipating the day of accounting. To stand before so majestic a Person . . . to consider the standards by which our life must be assessed, to realize that much of it may meet with his [Footnote continued on next page . . .]

Two crucial factors constrain advocates who adopt the *loss of eternal rewards* interpretation of passages such as 1 Corinthians 9:27. First, they embrace a *radicalized version* of “eternal security” by insisting that security in Christ Jesus guarantees that even individuals who fail to persevere faithfully in the gospel and in Jesus Christ will never perish but are saved and will remain saved forever. Second, their zealous defense of the gospel against a misconstrued intrusion of works-righteousness exceeds their understanding of how the gospel’s call for faithfulness to Christ Jesus is the gospel’s protracted call for initial faith in Christ Jesus.¹⁴ Thus, they are convinced that because passages like 1 Corinthians 9:23-27 call for steadfast perseverance they can have nothing to do with eternal salvation which is a gift. Perseverance, they construe it theologically, is contrary to faith because perseverance entails effort. As they conceive of perseverance, because perseverance entails endeavor and exertion of effort, perseverance necessarily entails an effort to *earn* or to *merit* something from God. So, in their zeal to preserve the freeness of God’s saving grace, they have formulated a *doctrine of merit* concerning rewards, on the same reasoning that others have done with salvation.¹⁵ While they repudiate the repugnant notion of *earning salvation* from God, they seem to find nothing repugnant about advocating the notion that *Christians can earn extra-salvation rewards* from God.¹⁶

censure and reproof—in all of that, an more, there are ample grounds for fearful anticipation” (*Grace in Eclipse: A Study on Eternal Rewards*, second edition 1987 (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1985), 51-52, 55).

Woodrow Kröll argues the same when he asserts, “Perhaps the Lord will reprimand us for not laboring faithfully. As pure service brings commendation, so impure service may bring condemnation. Remember, in the parable of the talents, the lord commended his faithful servant by saying ‘well done, though good and faithful servant.’ But at the same time he called the unprofitable servant a ‘wicked and slothful servant.’ Losing a reward is not simply the negative of gaining a reward. It carries with it all the shame and reproach due an untrue service and an unfaithful servant” (*It Will Be Worth It All: A Study in the Believer’s Rewards* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1977), 109). Cf. Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*, 128.

¹⁴ Advocates of the loss of eternal rewards view “see themselves as guardians of the gospel, the only consistent preachers of the free grace of Jesus Christ and the champions against others who introduce the idea of meriting or earning salvation” (Schreiner & Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us*, 25).

¹⁵ See the extended quotation from Calvin on pages 13-14 in this essay.

¹⁶ For a recent developed presentation of this view, see Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*, revised & updated 2003 (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1989), 123-137. Alcorn exhibits a zeal to protect the doctrine of salvation from the notion of merit that he imagines necessarily attaches to biblical passages such as 1 Corinthians 9:27, when he states, “[I]t’s easy to confuse God’s work and man’s. Many mistakenly believe that heaven is our reward for doing good things. This is absolutely not the case. Our presence in heaven is in no sense a reward for our works, but a gift freely given by God in [Footnote continued on next page ...]

Randy Alcorn summarizes well the doctrine of earned and varying rewards advocated by many whose beliefs are influenced if not shaped by Classical Dispensationalism. Alcorn places the following in antithetical pairs: (1) salvation is *past*; rewards are *future*; (2) salvation is *free*; rewards are *earned*; (3) salvation *cannot be lost*; rewards *can be lost*; (4) salvation is the *same for all believers*; rewards *differ among believers*; and (5) salvation is *for those who believe*; rewards are *for those who work*.¹⁷ Advocates of this doctrine of earned and varying rewards, such as Alcorn, exhibit little recognition, biblically speaking, of two crucial factors concerning salvation: first, that salvation is a reality that has both *already* and *not yet* aspects, and second, that salvation is a reality portrayed with rich and diverse imageries that include portraying salvation through athletic imagery as the prize and imperishable wreath to be attained and obtained.¹⁸

Those who hold the *loss of eternal rewards* view are concerned to separate biblical warnings, such as 1 Corinthians 9:23-27, from the grace of salvation because otherwise, as they view the matter, the grace of salvation and of eternal life would be earned by works.¹⁹

response to faith (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). . . . Salvation is about God's work on behalf of humanity. Conversely, rewards are a matter of *our* work for God. When it comes to salvation, our work for God is no substitute for God's work for us. God *saves* us because of Christ's work, not ours. Likewise, when it comes to rewards, God's work for humanity is no substitute for our work for God. God *rewards* us for *our* work, not Christ's. . . . Forgiveness means that God eliminates our eternal condemnation. But it does not mean that our actions in this life have no consequences on earth. . . . Neither does it mean our choices have no consequences in eternity. Forgiven people can still lose their rewards and forfeit eternal positions of responsibility they could have had" (126-128). Also see Alcorn, *The Law of Rewards: Giving What You Can't Keep to Gain What You Can't Lose* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2003). For earlier popular presentations of the same doctrine of meriting rewards, see Zane C. Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse*; and Woodrow Michael Kroll, *It Will Be Worth It All*.

¹⁷ Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*, 127.

¹⁸ For extended development of these two biblical themes, see Schreiner and Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us*, 46-86. In brief, "When the Scriptures speak of winning the prize, occasionally the image of a crown is utilized. For example, believers will obtain a crown of life (Jas 1:12; Rev 2:10), a crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8) and a crown of glory (1 Pet 5:4). . . . [W]e maintain that each of these crowns is a metaphor for obtaining the heavenly inheritance. That is, apart from receiving these crowns, no one will be saved on the final day, for to be saved is nothing short of being crowned with life, righteousness, and glory. We have already seen that the terms *life*, *righteousness* and *glory* are used elsewhere to denote our eternal inheritance. The metaphor of crown is added to them to emphasize that eternal life, salvation, glory and righteousness are prizes worth striving for and winning" (p. 83).

¹⁹ Other recent books that argue for the loss of rewards view include Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works*, 2nd edition 1991 (Dallas: Rendición Viva, 1981); *Grace in Eclipse; Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989); Robert Wilkin, *Confident in Christ*; Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990); and Erwin W. Lutzer, *Your Eternal Reward: Triumph and Tears at* [Footnote continued on next page ...]

According to their view, if obedience or good works are necessary in any sense for our salvation, then the gospel's offer of salvation is not free and eternal life is not a gift of grace. Thus, warnings that threaten loss, including Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 9:23-27, concern eternal rewards that would otherwise be received in the age to come, but say nothing concerning eternal salvation.²⁰

For all who embrace the *loss of eternal rewards view*, the above stated theological commitments govern their interpretation of passages such as 1 Corinthians 9:23-27. Thus, their exegetical comments tend to be brief, laconic, void of exegetical development, lacking in theological adeptness and even-handedness, but at the same time they tend to be conveyed in an *ipso facto* manner, with an air of authority and finality incommensurate with supporting evidence and argument. For example, commenting on the use of ἀδόκιμος in the New Testament, Robert Wilkin contends,

The word translated *rejected* might be thought to suggest that the people in question are unsaved. However, the opposite is the case. It is used elsewhere in the New Testament of believers who are *not approved* by God in their present experience.

Paul used this same word in reference to himself, saying that he feared he might not persevere in the faith and as a result might be *disapproved* (1 Corinthians 9:27). While Paul knew he was eternally secure and accepted by God, he did not know if he would persevere in the faith and be

the Judgment Seat of Christ (Chicago: Moody, 1998). Two British authors who defend this perspective include R. T. Kendall (*Once Saved, Always Saved* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983]) and Michael Eaton (*No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995]; idem., *A Theology of Encouragement* [Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995]).

²⁰ “For example, R. T. Kendall contends that anyone who believes the gospel ‘*will go to heaven when he dies no matter what work (or lack of work) may accompany such faith*’ (italics original; *Once Saved, Always Saved*, 49). Kendall asks, “‘What if a person who is saved falls into sin, stays in sin, and is found in that very condition when he dies? Will he still go to heaven?’” The answer is yes’ (pp. 50-51). He then concludes, ‘I therefore state categorically that the person who is saved—who confesses that Jesus is Lord and believes in his heart that God raised Him from the dead—*will go to heaven when he dies no matter what work (or lack of work) may accompany such faith*’ (pp. 52-53). Likewise, Charles Stanley affirms, ‘The Bible clearly teaches that God’s love for His people is of such magnitude that even those who walk away from the faith have not the slightest chance of slipping from His hand’ (*Eternal Security*, 74). He explains further, ‘Even if a believer for all practical purposes becomes an unbeliever, his salvation is not in jeopardy’ (p. 93). There is no danger of eternal condemnation because ‘believers who lose or abandon their faith will retain their salvation, for God remains faithful’ (p. 94)” (see *The Race Set Before Us*, 26).

approved by the Lord Jesus at His Judgment Seat (see 2 Corinthians 5:9-10).²¹

One needs to understand what Wilkin means when he speaks of perseverance in the faith. For Wilkin, even though a believer fails to persevere in the faith, one is still *saved*. Why? This is because, for Wilkin, perseverance in the faith has nothing to do with receiving salvation, because salvation is not something yet to be received but is wholly possessed now, and “believers have no guarantee that they will persevere” which is a matter of achieving extra-salvation rewards.²²

Wilkin embraces a radicalized version of *eternal security* that is void of and disconnected from perseverance in the faith because, inherited from his theological heritage of Classical Dispensationalism, he holds an over-realized eschatology of salvation made evident by his refusal to accept that salvation entails *not yet* aspects.²³ Though Wilkin makes this evident in many published essays and books, he expresses it explicitly in his review of *The Race Set Before Us* when he explains his disagreement with Tom Schreiner and me for identifying the racetrack, in biblical athletic imagery, as representing salvation.

The reason they call the racetrack *salvation* is probably because they see the end as what they call final salvation. However, since in this view the end is not final salvation, but the prize of eternal reward, they should have identified the track differently. A better designation would be that

²¹ Robert Wilkin, *Confident in Christ*, 156. Cf. Robert G. Gromacki (*Salvation is Forever* [Chicago: Moody, 1973], 125-126) who summarily and without exegetical or theological adeptness asserts, “In the great Olympic games, men strive for the gold, silver, and bronze medals, but Paul wanted to win an incorruptible crown. This crown is not eternal life, because men do not gain eternal life through effort or service. This crown is give to the Christian who practices the disciplined, spiritual life in order to win others to Christ.”

²² *Ibid.*, 132. Elsewhere Wilkin contends, “Acceptance and approval are two different things. God accepts all believers solely on the basis of their faith in Christ. Once they come to faith in Christ, they are forever accepted. Approval requires more than faith. It is conditioned upon spiritual maturity and is not a once-for-all event. A believe who is approved today is not guaranteed approval this time next year. Remaining in a state of Christ’s approval is contingent upon continuing to confess Christ in word and deed” (*Confident in Christ*, 65-66).

²³ Concerning the issue of first-century examples of over-realized eschatology of salvation, see William L. Lane, “I Tim. Iv.1-3. An Early Instance of Over-realized Eschatology?” *New Testament Studies* 11 (1965): 164-167. Also, see Anthony C. Thiselton, “Realized Eschatology at Corinth,” *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978): 510-526.

the track represents *the Christian life, progressive sanctification, or discipleship*.²⁴

Thus, Wilkin contends that *eternal security* concerns eternal salvation; *perseverance in the faith* concerns eternal rewards, not salvation.²⁵

Wilkin follows his mentor, Zane Hodges, who also, void of exegetically reasoned development and lacking biblical and theological refinement, writes concerning 1 Corinthians 9:27, “In this passage, the Apostle has been talking about the Christian life as a race. He is careful to pursue God’s approval in that race so that he will not be ‘disqualified’ from winning the proper reward.”²⁶

Michael Eaton captures the essence of the *loss of eternal rewards view*.

It is important to distinguish between justification and reward. Consider for example 1 Cor. 9:27. For G. B. Wilson it deals with “imitation” salvation. “A preacher of salvation may yet miss it. He may show others the way to heaven, and never get thither himself. Yet in the entire section (1 Cor. 9:1-27) there is no discussion of salvation. Rather what is mentioned is ministry, preaching, service to God in gaining disciples both from the Jews and from the gentiles. In 9:24-27 the point is explicitly that of “gaining a prize”. G. Fee’s exegesis of the passage is persuasive, and pin-points the reward-theme of these verses. Yet he seems to take it for granted that the reward is salvation. “Paul keeps warning and assurance in tension”, he says. But what if assurance and warning are not in tension? If there is real assurance it is difficult to take warnings of loss of salvation seriously. If there is real warning of loss of salvation it is difficult to have any real assurance for the future. This is not tension but contradiction; the two negate each other. But Paul does not equate salvation and reward; he explicitly distinguishes them in the same epistle (3:15). I suggest it is worthwhile considering the two

²⁴ Robert Wilkin, “Striving for the Prize of Eternal Salvation: A Review of Schreiner and Caneday’s *The Race Set Before Us*,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 15 (2002): 2-24. Wilkin responds, “Whereas many authors appear to be a bit reluctant to come out and call eternal salvation a prize to be won by endurance in obedience, Schreiner and Caneday do not share this reservation. I found it refreshing to see someone clearly admit they believe that eternal salvation is a prize won by ardent effort. While it grieves me to see someone garble the gospel in that way, I am happy that they at least do so openly” (p. 4).

²⁵ Wilkin, *Confident in Christ*, 137-141.

²⁶ Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 112-113. Robert Wilkin and Zane Hodges stand in the tradition advanced by Lewis S. Chafer. Cf. Chafer’s discussion of 1 Corinthians 9:27 in *Salvation: A Clear Doctrinal Analysis*, 12th printing 1977 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965), 77-78.

matters distinctly. A warning concerning the one need not be a warning concerning the other.²⁷

This teaching of varying degrees of reward and entailing the notion of earning Christ's approval at the Judgment Seat of Christ, which also entails the prospects of shame, of disgrace, and of Christ's disapproval, a kind of Protestant purgatory, is more than dubious. It is theologically and exegetically problematic.²⁸ This doctrine of merit is subject to the same opprobrium and indictment that Reformers brought against the Roman Catholic doctrine of condign merit. John Calvin put such notions to flight when he demonstrated that there is no theological or exegetical warrant to infer human capability to merit or to earn something from God on the basis of those biblical passages that speak of receiving a reward.²⁹ Calvin reasons,

The statement that "God will render to every man according to his works [Rom. 2:6] is explained with little difficulty. For the expression indicates an order of sequence rather than the cause. But, beyond any doubt, it is by these stages that the Lord completes our salvation when "he calls

²⁷ Eaton, *No Condemnation*, 206. The citation from G. B. Wilson (*1 Corinthians*, 138) is from Matthew Henry. Reference is also made to Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 433-441, esp. 440.

²⁸ Some advocates of this doctrine of varying degrees of rewards appeal to John Bunyan ("The Resurrection of the Dead, and Eternal Judgment," *The Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 2, ed. by George Offor [London: Blackie & Sons, 1875; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977], 102) and to Jonathan Edwards (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, revised & corrected by Edward Hickman, 1834, reprinted 1976 [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974], 902). Neither Bunyan nor Edwards, however, support this position theologically or exegetically. Instead, on the principle of good and reasonable inference concerning a passage such as Luke 19:11-26, Bunyan and Edwards conjecture that in the eternal kingdom all believers will be full of glory but that the portions of fullness will not necessarily be identical in that some will be like larger vessels than others, having larger capacities in the age to come corresponding to larger capacities in the present age. Bunyan poses and answers the question: "And why shall he that doth most for God in this world, enjoy most of him in that which is to come? But because by doing and acting, the heart and every faculty of the soul is enlarged, and more capacitated, whereby more room is made for glory. Every vessel of glory shall at that day be full of it; but every one will not be capable to contain a like measure, and so if they should have it communicated to them, would not be able to stand under it. . . . Therefore I say, the reward that the saints shall have at this day for all the good they have done, it is the enjoyment of God, according to their works: though they shall be freely justified and glorified without works." Bunyan and Edwards contend that there is continuity between God's allotments to us in the present age and God's apportionments to us in the age to come. This view of varying capacities for happiness and glory in the age to come does not correspond to or agree with the view of varying earned degrees of rewards advocated by Alcorn, Eaton, Gromacki, Hodges, Kendall, Kroll, Lutzer, Stanley, Wilkin, *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, and others. Thus, appeal to Bunyan and Edwards for support is inaccurate and misleading. Also, see criticism of both this view and the view of varying degrees of reward by Craig Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (1992): esp. 162 and 159-172.

²⁹ Some of the passages Calvin addresses are Matt. 5:12; 15:34-35; 16:27; Luke 6:23; John 5:29; Romans 2:9, 10; and 1 Corinthians 3:8.

those chosen to himself; those called he justifies; those justified he glorifies” [Rom. 8:30 p.]. That is to say, he receives his own into life by his mercy alone. Yet, since he leads them into possession of it through the race of good works in order to fulfill his own work in them according to the order that he has laid down, it is no wonder if they are said to be crowned according to their own works by which they are doubtless prepared to receive the crown of immortality. But they are fitly said to “work out their own salvation” [Phil. 2:12 p.] for the reason that, while devoting themselves to good works, they meditate upon eternal life. . . .

The use of the term “reward” is no reason for us to suppose that our works are the cause of our salvation. First, let us be heartily convinced “that the Kingdom of Heaven is not servants’ wages but sons’ inheritance [Eph. 1:18], which only they who have been adopted as sons by the Lord shall enjoy [cf. Gal 4:7], and that for no other reason than this adoption [cf. Eph. 1:5-6]. . . .

Still, the Lord does not trick us when he says that he will reward works with what he had given free before works. He wills that we be trained through good works to meditate upon the presentation or fruition, so to speak, of those things which he has promised, and to hasten through them to seek the blessed hope held out to us in heaven. . . .

But lest we should think that the reward the Lord promises us is reduced to a matter of merit, he has set forth a parable, in which he has made himself a householder who sends whomever he meets to cultivate his vineyard. Some are sent, indeed, at the first hour, others at the second, still others at the third, and some even at the eleventh; and at evening he pays them all equally [Matt. 20:1ff.]. . . . “The Lord has by this comparison illustrated the diversity of his manifold calling, pertaining to the one, and only grace . . . where it is clear that those sent to the vineyard at the eleventh hour and put on an equal footing with those who had labored the whole day represent the destiny of those whom God’s mercy rewards at the decline of the day, that is, at the end of their lives, in order to reveal the excellence of his grace. For he does not pay the price of their labor but showers the riches of his goodness upon those whom he has chosen apart from works. Thus they also, . . . who sweated in much labor, and did not receive more than the latecomers, should understand that they received a gift of grace, not the reward for their works.” . . .

Nothing is clearer than that a reward is promised for good works to relieve the weakness of our flesh by some comfort but not to puff up our hearts with vainglory. Whoever, then, deduces merit of works from this,

or weighs works and reward together, wanders very far from God's own plan.³⁰

Theological dyspepsia that gives rise to the *loss of eternal rewards view* also prompts others to advance variations on the view that Paul's concern is with an extra-salvation loss, not loss of salvation itself. Uneasy with the starkness of Paul's athletic imagery of becoming rejected from participating in the salvation that he proclaimed to others, some suppose that the apostle's use of αὐτὸς ἄδόκιμος γένωμαι speaks of receiving divine rejection of his ministry that entails nothing concerning his salvation. One version entails the notion that Paul fears to have his *testimony disqualified* by the Lord; another entails the idea that Paul fears God's *disapproval of his apostolic ministry*.

2.2. Loss of Testimony for the Gospel View

Charles Ray, for example, builds on the *loss of eternal rewards view* when he claims, "Paul's use of the word 'disqualified' ('castaway,' KJV) does not mean Christians can lose their salvation. . . . There is a difference between a prize and a gift. A prize is earned but a gift is simply given to you."³¹ On this basis, Ray contends that "Paul was concerned that his testimony would be ruined by some outward sin on his part, especially 'after [he had] preached to others' (cf. 9:16). He wanted to practice what he preached."³² In an effort to demonstrate what 1 Corinthians 9:27 does not say, Ray appeals to a litany of biblical "passages that present the concept of eternal security."³³ On this basis, Ray claims that even though some passages "seem to teach that a person must persevere" in order to be saved, such a "conclusion is simply not true."³⁴ Though Ray firmly asserts his theological conclusions, he offers no substantive argument to ground his assertions that ἄδόκιμος cannot refer to being "disqualified for salvation" (reprobation) but refers to a "disqualified

³⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. By Ford Lewis Battles, eighth printing 1977 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.18.1-4.

³¹ Charles Ray, "A Study of 1 Corinthians 9:23-27," *Testamentum Imperium* 1 (2005-2007): 7.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. See pp. 7-9.

³⁴ Ibid., 9-10.

testimony for the gospel.” Unfortunately, because Ray depends upon theological assertion to substitute for exegetical and theological presentation, there is no actual argument or reasoning to assess or to critique.

2.3. Loss of Divine Approval of Apostleship View

Reminiscent of Ray’s interpretation, but more sophisticated, developed, and argued with appeals to 1 Corinthians 9 is Judith Gundry Volf’s view. She contends that Paul’s cautionary and rigorous efforts to discipline his body and to master it do not arise out of any concern for his own salvation but instead to avoid becoming *disqualified in his apostolic ministry*.³⁵ As she reads the passage, she thinks that Paul wants to avoid becoming an ἀδόκιμος ἀπόστολος, a “disqualified apostle.” So, she claims, “Paul does not want to lose this divine approval in his ministry.”³⁶

Gundry Volf’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9 exaggerates Paul’s singular use of the word “defense” (ἀπολογία) in 9:3, so that, contrary to the progression of Paul’s argument, she renders the whole chapter a *defense* of his apostolic ministry.³⁷ Additionally, she demands more from Paul’s use of the athletic imagery than it warrants. She argues that if the whole of chapter 9 presents the apostle narrowly as a model for self-renunciation of his apostolic rights, it stands to reason that application of Paul’s athletic imagery to Christians in 9:24, 25 should be understood narrowly as referring only to “the contest in which they too engage to subdue the body by renouncing their Christian rights and liberties.”³⁸ By so constraining the purview and use of Paul’s athletic imagery in 1 Corinthians 9:23-27 to subduing the body’s appetites pertaining to Christian rights and freedoms with regard to foods offered to pagan idols, Gundry Volf supposes that she banishes questions that concern ἀδόκιμος and

³⁵ Judith Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 247. See p. 253 also, where she says, “According to the proposed interpretation . . . Paul’s rigorous efforts in apostolic ministry do not serve to secure his own salvation but to make him the gospel’s partner in fulfillment of his calling.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Gundry Volf claims that 1 Corinthians 9:27 “appropriately concludes Paul’s ἀπολογία which began at v. 3 by turning the very practices for which he is judged (ἀνακρίνειν, v. 3) unapproved as an apostle into arguments for his being approved before God as an apostle.”

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

salvation. Thus, she confidently poses her question with her presumed negative reply: “But is it likely that Paul could lose his salvation by exercising his very apostolic *rights* and Christian *freedom* instead of renouncing them?”³⁹

Gundry Volf’s explanation of Paul’s appeal, however, strains chapter nine’s continuity with chapters 8 and 10, both of which admittedly address the Corinthians concerning meats offered to idols and use of Christian liberty, but also how individual eternal salvation correlates to how one uses one’s rights and freedom (cf. 8:9-13; 10:1-13). Paul’s discussion throughout chapter 9 is not to taken up with a defense of his apostolic ministry per se. When he does write ἀπολογία (defense) in 9:3, he does so only to defend the fact that he has rights and freedoms as an apostle, rights and freedoms that he freely chose not to exercise for the good of the Corinthians, that through his ministry they might be saved. He presents his own disciplined restraint not to exercise his apostolic rights and freedoms as a model to be imitated by the Corinthians with regard to how they should behave toward one another concerning the issue of meats offered to pagan idols, and, he argues that eternal salvation is at stake in this matter, both theirs and other’s (8:9-13; 10:1-13).⁴⁰

Gundry Volf endeavors to exclude salvation from being at issue in 1 Corinthians 9:27 by tracking down elements throughout the passage that seem to contradict her stated conclusion. So, she wonders whether 1 Corinthians 9:23 indicates that Paul after all is “motivated by his hope of final salvation here”.⁴¹ Convinced that 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 renders it impossible to suppose that Paul feared to lose his salvation for failure in Christian ministry, Gundry Volf regards the

³⁹ Ibid. It is surprising that Gundry Volf reasons, “Paul mentions that other apostles make use of their rights in the gospel without this practice calling their salvation into question (9:4-6). Paul’s going beyond the call of duty in his apostolic ministry does not mean that he fears for his salvation. For he himself knows that even failure in his ministry would not have put his salvation in the balance” (241-242).

⁴⁰ Jerry Sumney argues that 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 “is best understood as the introduction to the stories that serve as the foundation for the instructions about sacrificed food in chapter 10, not as the conclusion to Paul’s presentation of himself as an example of giving up rights. Not only does this make better sense of what is found in 9:24-27; it also lessens the abruptness of the introduction of the examples from Israel’s history into the discussion. In addition to clarifying the place of 9:24-27 in the flow of Paul’s argument, parallels found in 8:9-13 and 9:19-23 support the unity of chapters 8 and 9” (“The Place of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 in Paul’s Argument,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 [2000]: 329-333).

⁴¹ Volf, *Paul and Perseverance*, 247.

usual translation of 1 Corinthians 9:23 unacceptable.⁴² She rejects the reasonable understanding of συγκοινωνός αὐτοῦ in which the genitive αὐτοῦ, referring to τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (the gospel) is taken as the object in which Paul hopes to have a share with others. Thus, Gundry Volf makes a valiant but misguided effort to make a case that συγκοινωνός following the genitive αὐτοῦ, though translated as “fellow-sharer in it” (“it” being τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, the gospel), should give way to her novel interpretation and translation, “its [the gospel’s] fellow-sharer, partner.”⁴³ Despite her claim that taking “αὐτοῦ at 9:23 as a genitive of person may even be grammatically preferable,” her construal of the grammar is impossible. The grammatical structures of the two NT examples that she cites to support her case are quite unlike that of 1 Corinthians 9:23.⁴⁴ In 9:23, not the genitive αὐτοῦ but the nominative συγκοινωνός is the predicate of the verb γένωμαι. Thus Gundry Volf’s translation, “in order that I may become ‘its [the gospel’s] fellow-sharer, partner’” is grammatically impossible, given the case of the noun (nominative) and the case of the pronoun (genitive).⁴⁵ Paul’s phrasing requires that we translate it “in order that I may become a fellow partaker of it [the gospel].” Given her translation, Gundry Volf argues that Paul wants to “become the gospel’s fellow-sharer, i.e., partner in ministry” and not “become a fellow partaker of salvation with others, namely, with the Corinthians.” Gundry Volf’s exegetical effort would reduce Paul’s meaning so that his “aim is to become the gospel’s partner (instead of its antagonist) in bringing people into the sphere of salvation.”⁴⁶ Συγκοινωνός αὐτοῦ, here, cannot bear her novel meaning.

⁴² Ibid., 248.

⁴³ Ibid., 249.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 249. Gundry Volf appeals to Phil 1:7 (τοῦ εὐαγγελίου συγκοινωνός μου) and Rev 1:9 (ὁ ἀδελπὸς ὑμῶν καὶ συγκοινωνός). If Paul intended what Gundry Volf contends, “a partner with the gospel,” he would have written συγκοινωνός αὐτῷ. Cf. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, HNTC (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 216.

⁴⁵ This grammatical error is remarkable. One cannot escape the sense that her theological commitment drives her exegesis on this passage. See p. 2 where Gundry Volf acknowledges, “As the reader will discover, the exegetical conclusions reached here through in-depth analysis of the texts tend toward the classical Reformed doctrine of perseverance. Nevertheless, this study was not undertaken to confirm that doctrine; nor is the book meant to function as an exegetical defense of it.” In actuality, however, were her inclinations toward “the classical Reformed doctrine of perseverance,” her exegesis on many passages, including 1 Corinthians 9:23-27, would have accepted the plain sense of Paul’s passage.

⁴⁶ Volf, *Paul and Perseverance*, 253.

Essentially, Gundry Volf's claim is that Paul's whole concern is simply that he wants to be a positive influence toward the salvation of others, particularly the Corinthians, and not be an impediment to their salvation but join in partnership with the gospel. Indeed, in 9:13, Paul explicitly states a desire like this, "but we endure anything lest we give a hindrance to the gospel of Christ." Likewise, the apostle expands on this desire in 9:19-22. However, in 9:23, the apostle adds an expression of self-interest when he says, "I do all this on account of the gospel in order that I might become a fellow participant in it." Despite Gundry Volf's protests to the contrary, Paul's objective is that he might become a participant with others in salvation, others to whom he proclaims the gospel. For the sake of the argument, we may readily grant the benefit of the doubt to Gundry Volf that τὸ εὐαγγέλιον does not bear the sense "the blessings of salvation promised in the gospel."⁴⁷ At the same time, for the sake of the argument, we may also grant the benefit of the doubt that τὸ εὐαγγέλιον in "1 Corinthians 9 denotes the divine power of salvation which Paul preaches (9:12, 14a, 18b). . . ."⁴⁸ After all, Paul's letter to the Corinthians establishes this when he explains that the gospel he preaches is "the message of the cross" which "to us who are being saved is *the power of God*" (1:18), an expression parallel to that of Romans 1:16, where the apostle identifies τὸ εὐαγγέλιον as "the power of God unto salvation." So, conceding these points, what is Paul's desire as expressed in 9:23? It is simply this, "I do all this on account of the gospel in order that I might become a fellow participant with others in *God's power of salvation*."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 248.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Cf. Fee observes, "The preceding argument makes it clear that by 'the gospel' Paul is not referring to its content as such, but to the proclaimed gospel as God's saving power at work in the world (cf. Rom. 1:16). . . . But the final purpose clause, (lit.) 'that I may be a fellow-participant in it,' is less than certain. Is he referring to his participation in the *work* of the gospel, as in the preceding argument (esp. vv. 16-18, or to his sharing with them in its *benefits* ('blessings, promises'), in anticipation of the paragraph that follows? Although the former is an attractive option, Paul's usage elsewhere [cf. Rom. 11:17; Phil. 1:7] suggests that he means the latter. The problem, of course, is that that sounds self-serving and seems to undercut what has been said in the preceding verses. But not so. Paul is not so much suggesting that he does all things so that in the end he will receive the benefits of the gospel, as that he places himself alongside those to whom he has preached and to whom he now writes. Along with them, he hopes to share in the final blessings of the gospel." To this, Fee adds, "But such is not guaranteed; he and they must persevere in the gospel to share in its promises" (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 432).

Thus, despite Gundry Volf's explanations of the passage, Paul's concern in 1 Corinthians 9:23-27 is not unclear.⁵⁰ He is concerned that after he has proclaimed the gospel of God's saving power to others, lest he himself fail to participate in this same salvation. Paul's concern is what he expresses to his younger pastoral associate, Timothy, when he admonishes, "Watch yourself and your teaching. Persevere in these things, for if you do this, you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1 Tim. 4:16).

3. Means of Salvation View

Incommodious as Paul's statements may be to one's theological schema, try as many have, their efforts fall short of escaping the fact that the apostle's athletic imagery does concern his eternal salvation and ours. The text stubbornly resists recasting Paul's concerns as extra-salvation losses. Fear to become ἀδόκιμος with reference to salvation motivates Paul. Admittedly, the apostle's application of the athletic imagery to himself to express the fact that preaching the good news of salvation to others does not guarantee his own salvation is arresting because, as C. K. Barrett argues, it suggests that "his conversion, his baptism, his call to apostleship, his service in the Gospel, do not guarantee his eternal salvation."⁵¹

As already demonstrated, Paul's athletic imagery (1 Cor. 9:24-27) emerges out of the expression of his desire to "become with others a fellow partaker of God's saving power" (9:23). Following the climaxing expression of his desire, "I have become all things to all people in order that by all means I might save some" (9:22), then Paul expresses his self-interest in this labor of love, "that I might become a fellow partaker of the gospel." By "fellow partaker of the gospel" (συγκοινωνός αὐτοῦ), Paul means a fellow participant of the gospel with those whom he saves through the proclamation of the good news.⁵² When Paul expresses *self-interest*, in other words, he is

⁵⁰ Others have offered critiques of Gundry Volf's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9. See, e.g., B. J. Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy: Eschatology, Perseverance, and Falling Away in the Corinthian Congregation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 28-34; and David Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 444. That Gundry Volf excludes from her exegetical purview the Pastoral Letters plus Ephesians and Colossians as disputed letters, disallows her any appeal to 1 Tim. 4:16 as parallel in thought to 1 Cor. 9:23-27 (*Paul and Perseverance*, 3).

⁵¹ Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, , 218.

⁵² BDAG, 952 (συγκοινωνός followed by the genitive of the thing shared with others).

neither exhibiting “selfishness” nor being “self-serving.”⁵³ His *self-interest* actually discloses humility, for the apostle who proclaims the gospel of God’s saving power stands with all to whom he announces the good news as one who is in continual need of faithfulness to the same message of God’s saving power, if he would obtain salvation. This continual need of faithfulness that he might be saved in the Day of Judgment is the burden of his reasoning throughout 1 Corinthians 9.

The apostle does not occupy a position of privilege from which he wields power over others (9:15). The very message that constrains him to preach to others also constrains how he, as a minister of the gospel, must behave (9:16). For, by proclaiming the gospel to the Corinthians he is discharging a trust the Lord committed to him (9:17). Paul understands that eternal calamity will be his apart from faithfully discharging this trust. This is why he says, “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the good news!” (9:16; cf. Jer. 20:9). Yet, some in Corinth seem to think that restraining exercise of his apostolic authority (ἐξουσία) to refrain from laboring with his own hands but rely on his hearers to provide for his personal needs (1 Cor. 9:6-12) indicates that he has no apostolic ἐξουσία at all. Paul reasons that he does indeed have this ἐξουσία, but for him to submit to the patronage system in Corinth would risk subjecting his apostolic right and freedom to being viewed as misuse or perhaps even as abuse. Non-use of his apostolic rights adorns the freeness of the gospel he proclaims. Offering the gospel free of charge, then, is his reward, for as a slave entrusted with a commission, he expects no reward (9:17-18).⁵⁴

⁵³ Cf. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 432.

⁵⁴ Gundry Volf addresses 1 Corinthians 9:15-18 with a view to aiding her case to interpret 9:27. She correctly observes, “Paul does in fact imply that resisting the divine compulsion laid upon him to preach the gospel would bring on God’s judgment. It is his destiny to preach the gospel, a destiny which he cannot escape—like the prophets of old (cf. Jer. 20:9)—without going against the will of God.” Nevertheless, her next sentence exposes a fallacy in her reasoning when she states, “Paul, however, does not appear to be in danger of resisting this divine necessity to preach the gospel. His struggle is not whether to preach—without question he will do so; he must; ἀνάγκη γάρ μοι ἐπίκειται (9:16b). Rather, Paul’s aim is to do more than preach; he endeavors to go beyond the call of duty. He wants to get a reward for his apostolic ministry (μισθός, 9:17, 18), to have a boast that will not be made empty (καύχημα, 9:15, 16a). He assumes salvation. What is in question is the evaluation of his service as an apostle.” It is remarkable that Gundry Volf claims that Paul “assumes salvation” for himself when salvation is the very thing that he is concerned to attain, even as her comments affirm in the beginning. Where does her reasoning go awry? Her misstep occurs when she slips from observing the principle of divine constrain over Paul in his ministry to rendering her judgment that Paul “does not appear to be in danger.” That Paul is not in danger of opposing “the divine necessity to preach the gospel” does not, [Footnote continued on next page ...]

In 9:19-23, Paul expands the scope of his argument to include the breadth of his apostolic mission, no longer restricted to the local setting in Corinth. He does not adapt the message of the gospel to varying contexts, but he freely employs his freedom to become a slave to others by adapting himself in matters of social and ethnic customs that he might by all means save some, whether they are Jews, whether they are under the Law of Moses or not, or whether they are weak. Paul caps this off by saying, “I do all these things on account of the gospel, in order that with others I might become a fellow partaker of God’s saving power” (9:23).

Some suppose that 9:19-23 links to 9:15-18 as Paul’s concluding comments on his refusal to accept material or financial support from the Corinthians.⁵⁵ Most, however, suppose that Paul resumes the theme of 8:13, where he affirms willingness to refrain from eating meat lest he cause another to sin. The flow of Paul’s argument in 9:19-23, however, goes significantly beyond abstinence to include indulgence, as 9:21 makes clear.⁵⁶ Thus, 9:23 properly expresses a full and wide conclusion: “I do *all things* on account of the gospel in order that I might become a fellow partaker of it.” No longer is the apostle focused only upon abstaining from eating meats offered to pagan idols, which constrains Gundry Volf’s interpretation of 9:23-27. Rather, Paul’s doing “all things on account of the gospel” entails everything that removes impediments to the reception of the gospel, whether abstinence or indulgence in any cultural matter that itself is not forbidden or required by the gospel. Thus, the apostle expresses his persevering desire: “I do all this on account of the gospel in order that I might become a fellow participant with others in God’s power of salvation.” Both his hearers and he must persevere in the gospel if they hope to receive the salvation the gospel announces.

Earlier, I identified the question that tends to guide interpreters concerning 1 Corinthians 9:23-27. Does Paul fear *that he might not*

however, alter the invariable connection between how he discharges his divine constraint and his own personal salvation or perdition. Because of the misstep in her reasoning, Gundry Volf introduces an extracurricular or extra-salvation “reward”

⁵⁵ See, e.g., R. F. Hock, “Paul’s Tentmaking and the Problem of His Social Class,” *JBL* 97 (1978): 558-561; and H. L. Ellison, “Paul and the Law—‘All Things to All Men,’” in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essay presented to F. F. Bruce on his 60th Birthday* (ed. W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 195-202.

⁵⁶ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 424.

persevere in salvation but perish and be lost in perdition in the end? I also stated that we will not adequately expound Paul's meaning unless we probe by raising a more basic and more foundational question. As we read and interpret, the questions we ask concerning the biblical text either enlighten our understanding of the text's meaning or they obscure our comprehension. It is lamentable that for various reasons, even biblical exegetes are capable of failing to raise the necessary and proper questions concerning 1 Corinthians 9:23-27. Too easily exegetes restrict their purview on passages such as 1 Corinthians 9:23-27 to two questions: (1) Does Paul fear that he might lose his salvation? (2) Or, is he afraid that he might lose an extra-salvation reward? These two questions set up a false disjunction that also frames the question by begging the question.⁵⁷ Though we need to address the concerns of these two theological questions, the more crucial exegetical question that we need to ask concerning Paul's passage is: What is the *function* that Paul assigns to his athletic imagery in 1 Corinthians 9:23-27? The short answer is that Paul's assigned function is *parenetic*; the passage is punctuated with exhortation. The fuller answer is that Paul's passage functions to give expression first to his own caution and then to alert every believer lest we presume that God's grace and power will save us despite failing to persevere in the gospel that we might become fellow-participants with others in God's saving power. The passage functions as a warning. Paul appeals to the Corinthians to adopt his posture with regard to his own salvation. Under the athletic imagery, he makes it clear that he voluntarily forgoes rights and freedoms available to him, in order that he might obtain salvation and not be rejected by God in the Day of Judgment. So, the passage functions to admonish and to warn Christians lest we perish by insisting upon using our rights, even contrary to our own salvation.

What Paul says is urgent not only for him but for all who would have a share in God's saving power. Lest we assume that salvation is ours regardless how we behave, the apostle appeals to us with his extended analogy, the athletic imagery of 9:24-27. Paul asks, "Do you not know that in a race those who run all actually run, but only one

⁵⁷ For discussion of these kinds of fallacies in the work of interpretation, see D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 90-92, 105-106.

receives the prize?” He frames his question on a familiar athletic analogy to draw attention to the urgency of his principal concern, self discipline in order to win the prize. So, he applies the arena motif by commanding, “Run in such a manner that you might obtain it” (9:24). To win one need not only run but to run well. The believer must not only leave the starting blocks but continue to run to the goal in order to obtain the prize, a share in the gospel.

Paul reasons that if games in the arena strictly govern the behavior of those who compete to win, how much more should the arena of the gospel regulate our desire to lay hold of salvation? He applies the imagery: “Everyone who competes for a prize exercises self-control with regard to everything. They do it in order to receive a perishable wreath, but we do it for an imperishable one. Accordingly, in this manner I run, not aimlessly; in this manner I fight with the fists, not punching the air. But I discipline my body and I subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself become disqualified” (9:25-27).

Within the ancient athletic arena, a runner was judged *disqualified* (ἄδόκιμος) for breaking the rules of the games, including rules of training (cf. 2 Tim 2:5). The adjective, ἄδόκιμος, depicts an individual who is rejected after being tested.⁵⁸ What is the meaning Paul assigns to the word as he places it within his athletic imagery? Despite objections to the contrary, it is unreasonable to suppose that Paul suspends his athletic imagery mid-sentence in 9:27, just before saying “lest after preaching to others I myself become disqualified.”⁵⁹ It is also unreasonable to insist that Paul’s mention of *preaching* (κηρύξας) is metaphorical as some have taken it as integral to the athletic imagery on the premise that a *herald* (κήρυξ) summoned the

⁵⁸ BDAG, 21.

⁵⁹ See V. C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature*, vol. 16, SNTSMS (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 95-96. Pfitzner contends that Paul’s use theological use of δόκιμος/ἄδόκιμος (*approved/disapproved*) in a theological way in other contexts, and that Paul’s prior use of *preaching* (κηρύξας) is not metaphorical “speak decidedly against the assumption that the athletic metaphor is here continued” in his use of ἄδόκιμος. Cf. also, Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 716. Fee rightly rejects Pfitzner’s interpretation as unconvincing. “It is hard to imagine the Corinthians, in light of the entire paragraph, not hearing this as metaphor; on the other hand, even as metaphor it carries the full weight of Paul’s theological concerns expressed elsewhere” (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 440). It is true that Paul’s theological use of ἄδόκιμος elsewhere (Rom. 1:28; 2 Cor. 13:5, 6, 7; 2 Tim. 3:8; Tit. 1:16) invariably refers to reprobation. Theologically, the same is true in 1 Cor. 9:27, except that it refers to reprobation under the athletic imagery of a competitor who fails to pass the test of qualification.

athletes and announced the rules of competition.⁶⁰ Paul's arena imagery does not represent him as the *herald* who announces the games but as an *athlete* who competes in the games. *Preaching to others* is an integral aspect of the apostle's contest in the arena of life where his objective is to become qualified and not disqualified for participating in salvation.

The athletic imagery's significance in 9:27 is not ambiguous in itself. Perhaps our lack of adeptness with imagery, our theological presuppositions, or a combination of the two obscures the apostle's meaning, thus requiring clarification and disambiguation. Paul engages in strict self discipline because he has an interest for himself in the gospel, the message he preaches to others. His rigorous discipline has purpose, namely, "lest after preaching to others, I become disqualified." By saying "lest . . . I become disqualified" (αὐτὸς ἀδόκιμος γένωμαι) Paul repeats in *the form of a warning* what he previously expresses in *the form of positive purpose* when he says "in order that I might become a fellow partaker of the gospel" (ἵνα συγκοινωνὸς αὐτοῦ γένωμαι; 9:23). Both 9:23 and 9:27 express Paul's singular concern to benefit from the gospel he proclaims to others. Observe the two verses in parallel.

And I do all things on account of the gospel, in order *that I might be a fellow partaker of it* (9:23).

But I punish my body and enslave it, lest after I have preached to others, *I myself should become disqualified* (9:27).

The whole context makes it clear that to become *disqualified* (ἀδόκιμος) is opposite becoming a *fellow partaker of the gospel* (συγκοινωνὸς αὐτοῦ; 9:23) of the gospel.

For the apostle, then, ἀδόκιμος metaphorically represents reprobation, banishment from eternal salvation at the close of the race that takes place in the arena of life in the present age.⁶¹ Paul's athletic imagery, therefore, makes clear to the Corinthians that they are not above him, the apostle who proclaims the good news of God's saving

⁶⁰ See, e.g., Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, trans. A. Cusin (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1886; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 48.

⁶¹ Remarkably, Thiselton fails to acknowledge that αὐτὸς ἀδόκιμος γένωμαι in Paul's athletic metaphor represents συγκοινωνὸς αὐτοῦ γένωμαι. Consequently, he claims, "The **test** reveals failures of an unspecified nature, not utter rejection" (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 717).

power to them. If, in the Day of Judgment, he will be reprobated before God apart from perseverance in the way of the gospel (cf. 1 Tim. 4:16), there will also be no salvation for them either, if they fail to follow his pattern of running the race to win. Leaving the starting blocks does not win the wreath of victory apart from going the distance and crossing the finish line. We will obtain the imperishable wreath of salvation only by running with diligent and deliberate perseverance in the arena of faith.⁶²

So, how should we respond to the two questions that expositors usually ask concerning 1 Corinthians 9:23-27? Does Paul fear that he might lose his salvation? Or, is he afraid that he might lose an extra-salvation reward?

The apostle's athletic imagery that warns does imply that fear to fail to win is a proper motivation for Paul and for all believers. This fear, however, must be understood properly within Paul's theological framework. To answer the second question first, the apostle is not moved to fear loss of a reward that is distinct and different from salvation. Zeal against the loss of eternal salvation view misleads many to inject the notion of reward over against salvation into 1 Corinthians 9:23-27. Paul expresses his concern unequivocally. He wants to "become a fellow partaker with others in the gospel which is God's power unto salvation," and he implies fear "lest after preaching to others I myself become disqualified (reprobate)."

Consider the first question. Does Paul fear that he might lose his salvation? A proper response is to affirm that *the apostle fears to perish* or that *he fears lest he perish* but *not* that *he fears that he might lose his salvation*. Someone may object that this is expressing a distinction without a difference. Two important distinctions, however, do render an important difference with the way the question is framed above.

⁶² "What an argument and what a reproof is this! The reckless and listless Corinthians thought they could safely indulge themselves to the very verge of sin, while this devoted apostle considered himself as engaged in a life-struggle for his salvation. This same apostle, however, who evidently acted on the principle that the righteous scarcely are saved, and that the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, at other times breaks out in the most joyful assurance of salvation, and says that he was persuaded that nothing in heaven, earth or hell could ever separate him from the love of God. Rom. 8,38. 39. The one state of mind is the necessary condition of the other. It is only those who are conscious of this constant and deadly struggle with sin, to whom this assurance is given." See Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, reprint edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 169.

First, because biblically speaking reception of salvation entails both *already* and *not yet* aspects, to phrase the question—Does Paul fear that he might lose his salvation?—is confusing. Is the question asking whether Paul fears loss of the aspects of salvation he *already* possesses in the present age or that he fears loss of the *not yet* aspects of salvation that he will not obtain until the coming age? The question is confusing for at least two reasons. First, nowhere do New Testament writers, including Paul, ever express warnings against perishing the way the question does, using the expression, *loss of salvation*. Paul does encourage believers by writing, “For *salvation is nearer to us now* than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11). Paul also does admonish believers by saying, “*Bring to completion your own salvation* with fear and trembling, for the one who is working in you both to desire and to do is God, on behalf of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13).⁶³ When the apostle administers warnings against eternal loss, however, he avoids using the expression, *loss of salvation*. This raises the second reason the characteristic question is confusing. For Paul, salvation, which consists of both *already* and *not yet* aspects, is a coherent and indivisible whole. No one who possesses salvation’s *already* aspects will fail to receive salvation’s *not yet* aspects also. Anyone who runs the marathon race to obtain the imperishable wreath of salvation runs by the power of God’s sustaining grace in Christ Jesus. Believers persevere in faith with the assurance that God “will sustain you to the end, to be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, through whom you were called into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ, is faithful” (1 Cor. 1:8-9). Paul unequivocally affirms that, in Christ Jesus, salvation’s *already* and *not yet* aspects are unbreakable and continuous when he says concerning God’s promises and the power of his grace, “those whom God called, he also justified; those whom he justified, he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29-30). This is true because, as Paul contends, nothing can ever separate believers from Christ’s love (Rom. 8:35-39).⁶⁴

There is a second crucial distinction that needs to be stated that renders an important difference concerning how I pose the question over against the typical way expositors raise their flawed question:

⁶³ See Schreiner and Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us*, 183-186.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 259-267.

Does Paul fear that he might lose his salvation? Paul never implies personal *fear that he might perish* but he does imply that he *fears to perish* or that he *fears lest he perish*. There is a vast difference between *fearing to perish* and *fearing that I might perish*, whether in rock climbing or in living the Christian life. *Fearing that I might perish*, in both situations, entails *fright* that destroys and expels confidence and assurance. *Fearing to perish*, when rock climbing or running to obtain final salvation, is the proper kind of fear that cultivates caution and is wholly compatible with confidence and assurance of achieving the goal. *Fear to perish* is the godly response to Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 9:23-27; *fear to perish* is integral to attaining and obtaining the imperishable wreath of salvation.

Now it is necessary to ask whether the apostle Paul fears that he might lose the race in which salvation is the imperishable wreath. Does he fear that it is possible that God will reject him as a reprobate in the Day of Judgment? If one answers affirmatively, then one must be prepared to demonstrate that Paul regards it necessary to *doubt* God's faithfulness to his promise to preserve his people to the end in order that he can *believe* that it is necessary to persevere with caution and diligence to the end in hope that he might be saved. The point at issue is this, that if we adopt this view, we necessarily suppose that Paul must *doubt God's faithfulness* to his promise to preserve his people unto final salvation so that he can also *believe God's warning* that apart from perseverance in the gospel he will not be saved.⁶⁵ Such a view of how promise and warning correlate does not allow one simultaneously to believe the warning, that perseverance is essential for attaining final salvation, and to believe the promise, that God preserves everyone of his children unto final salvation. Of course, oscillating between such believing and doubting is silly and has no

⁶⁵ It is worth observing that Robert Shank engages just this kind of reasoning when reading G. C. Berkouwer's *Faith and Perseverance*, trans. Robert D. Knudsen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958). Shank argues that Berkouwer "implies that the 'consolation' passages and the 'alarming admonitions' cannot be viewed with complete sincerity at one and the same time, for a person cannot be motivated by the 'alarming admonitions' until he abandons his confidence in the 'consolation' passages—the (supposed) promises of God that perseverance is inevitable and apostasy is impossible" (*Life in the Son*, 167). In actuality, Shank, along with all who adopt his belief that believers in Christ may yet perish, holds just such a view, oscillating "between two contradictory persuasions," now assured of God's irrevocable promise of salvation to all who believe in Christ Jesus, now doubting God's promise that he will preserve unto final salvation everyone who believes in Jesus Christ so that I might believe God's warnings.

biblical warrant. Nevertheless, such oscillation is precisely what we must affirm, if we hold that Paul fears that God might reject him as a reprobate in the Day of Judgment.⁶⁶ Swinging back and forth between believing and doubting is contrary to Paul's gospel and finds no support in his warning passage. Paul, who features himself in the warning portrayed in the athletic imagery of 1 Corinthians 9:23-27, is the same man who urges the Corinthians to believe in God's steadfastness to confirm them, his own children, unto final salvation (1 Cor. 1:8-9).

Paul's warning, then, is not opposed to the promise of grace but rather his warning is a means of grace and salvation, for gospel warnings are a species of gospel promises.⁶⁷ Because God's warnings serve God's promises, warnings of danger complement promises of salvation; both are God's means of grace and salvation.⁶⁸

Conclusion

The work of exegetes and theologians thrives in part upon disagreements with how others read and interpret biblical texts. Yet, exegetes and theologians frequently complain about the theological biases of others, as though they themselves had none and as though others are unreflective about their biases.⁶⁹ As we read exegetical and

⁶⁶ This seems to be the reason I. Howard Marshall qualifies his statements of uncertainty when he says, "The possibility is, therefore, seriously to be entertained that in 1 Corinthians 9:27 Paul raises the question of his own failure to pass the test and rejection on the Day of Judgment. . . . But although this theoretical possibility is raised, there is little doubt that Paul felt no severe temptation from this quarter (1 Corinthians 7:7), and his overwhelming feeling is one of confidence regarding his own salvation" (*Kept by the Power of God*, 121).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 38-45.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 143-213.

⁶⁹ For example, after offering surveys of works on perseverance and apostasy by G. C. Berkouwer, D. A. Carson, I. Howard Marshall, and Judith Gundry Volf, B. J. Oropeza complains, "Hence, in theological terms, it seems that even a serious exegesis of New Testament passages on perseverance and apostasy could result in one's position ending somewhere within the continuum marked by Calvinism and Arminianism. This occurrence is frequently the case, it seems, because a number of theologians and biblical exegetes from Calvinist or Arminian persuasions have often assumed that a unilateral conception is maintained by the various New Testament authors—as though these authors all believed and thought alike on apostasy and perseverance irrespective of different circumstances, time, education, and cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Studies such as Dunn's *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* have demonstrated that the New Testament apostles and saints did not always think and believe alike (e.g., Gal. 2)" (*Paul and Apostasy*, 33-34). Lack of self-reflection ironically impairs and prejudices Oropeza's criticisms. Even his assumption that Dunn proves his thesis in *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* stands justifiably challenged and disputed (e.g., D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson [Footnote continued on next page ...]

theological comments by others, we need to be gracious toward them and be prepared to grant them the benefit of the doubt that their biases are informed and warranted, not uninformed and blind.⁷⁰ But at the same time we need to be willing to identify kindly others' blind spots and be prepared for correction ourselves, for the work of exegesis and theology is a collaborative endeavor that entails correctives.

Earlier, in the introduction of this essay I made the case that everyone reads the Bible through a set of preconceptions, for good or for ill. True as this is, we are still capable of acquiring preconceptions shaped, controlled, and adjusted by the Scriptures, but at the same time in concert with Scripture so that we can accurately and truthfully represent what the Scriptures teach. On this basis, then, we need neither shrink from confidently affirming what a portion of Scripture actually means nor attempt to establish afresh every presupposition that guides or regulates our exposition of a particular passage of Scripture. Thus, in humility we are warranted to affirm that we understand what the Bible means in this or in that passage. Do preconceptions govern my presentation of the meaning of Paul's warning athletic imagery in 1 Corinthians 9:23-27? Indeed, they do, and neither time nor space suffices to restate or to detail those preconceptions that function as presuppositions that have served as guardrails to this essay.

I gladly acknowledge that many theological beliefs, grounded in extensive prior exegetical and theological work in the Scriptures, are at work in this essay and that this essay discloses them to all who have eyes to see or ears to hear and desire to assess them. Those tested and demonstrated beliefs prompt the exegetical, theological, rhetorical, linguistic, and semantic questions that I endeavor to address throughout this essay, whether concerning the biblical text itself or concerning what others have said concerning the biblical text. On this basis, I have offered what I regard to be reflective and warranted challenges to how others read and interpret Paul's meaning in 1 Corinthians 9:23-27, and I have offered a proposal that provides

& John D. Woodbridge [Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1983], 65-95). Oropeza fails to realize that his own unstated and undemonstrated theological assumptions lead him to draw his own conclusions concerning apostasy in Paul's letters. His belief in the possibility of apostasy colors his exegesis.

⁷⁰ For a case that biases are necessary and good, see Theodore Dalrymple, *In Praise of Prejudice: The Necessity of Preconceived Ideas* (New York: Encounter, 2007).

an evenhanded explanation of the passage that allows for both promise and warning to have their distinctive functions without conflict so as to evoke faith that perseveres in the gospel and will attain salvation in the Last Day.

Both those who hold to and advocate the *loss of eternal salvation* view and the *loss of eternal rewards* view drive a wedge of separation between God's warnings to believers, such as the apostle's words in 1 Corinthians 9:23-27, and God's promises of salvation to believers in Christ Jesus. Advocates of the *loss of eternal salvation* view isolate warnings from promises by placing them opposite one another, for they insist that genuine believers in Christ Jesus may finally perish. Advocates of the *loss of eternal rewards* view isolate warnings from promises by insisting that each is concerned with wholly different matters. Their theological beliefs require another separation, a separation between salvation and reward. Thus, as they view biblical passages, promise concerns assured salvation in the form of "eternal security" (not perseverance), and warning concerns possible loss of varying rewards that are achieved distinct from and in addition to possessing salvation. According to their belief systems, salvation is free but rewards are earned.

As we study the biblical text we learn to allow the text itself to frame the questions we ask of it but also how to frame those questions. Concerning 1 Corinthians 9:27, Fee asks, "But does Paul actually mean that one can fail to obtain the prize?" He responds, "Some would say no, but usually because of a prior theological commitment, not because of what the text itself says."⁷¹ I have argued that though we need to be prepared to answer this question for the spiritual welfare of believers, it is an inadequate question for doing exegesis because it will misguide us. Just as one's negative answer to Fee's question discloses "a prior theological commitment" so also does Fee's affirmative response. The question simply exposes other theological commitments exegetes possess, including Fee's. Fee's question is one that we eventually will need to pose and answer, given the fact that it is the question pushed to the foreground by people's theological biases. We need, however, to get beyond the theological impasse that the question poses and probe deeper to ask the more

⁷¹ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 440

foundational question. That question concerns the *function* of Paul's athletic imagery in 1 Corinthians 9:23-27.

If we properly understand the passage, Paul's words serve to warn both him and all Christians, without simultaneously calling upon us to doubt that God will assuredly preserve us as his children safely in his grace to the end. Instead, to believe and to act upon Paul's urgent warning lest we perish eternally is entirely compatible with believing the apostle's affirmations of steadfast confidence that God will preserve us, his own people, unto final salvation. Precisely because the apostle is fully confident of God's power to secure everyone who believes in Christ Jesus, Paul also believes that it is necessary to warn the same believers that God requires everyone not only to leave the starting blocks but also to run faithfully to the end in order that we might be saved in the Day of Salvation.

There is an inescapable and inseparable connection between how Paul discharges his divine trust as a minister of the gospel and his own personal salvation or perdition. For, there is an inseparable continuity between the start and the finish line, and it runs through the exigencies and pressures of life in this present world as it demands faithful endurance from us believers. Hence, elsewhere the apostle admonishes Timothy, a younger minister of the gospel, "Watch yourself and your teaching. Persevere in these things, for if you do this, you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1 Tim. 4:16).