

Running The Race

In Hebrews chapter 12, the exhortation is given to:

“lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and *let us run with patience the race that is set before us*”.

The life of the believer then, is in certain respects like a race – a race which requires us to forsake everything that might hinder us in achieving the victory. We are to patiently run, the apostle continues: “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:1-2).

From these words, we learn that our Master is waiting for us at the finishing line. He has gone before us; he has already won the race, and achieved the victory. But as we continue running through life, we see him ever before us, encouraging us to continue, enduring all things for his sake, that we might share his victory. We look to him as one who has endured much shame and suffering, but also as one who now sits at the Father’s Right Hand in Glory, having accomplished his work.

This theme of *running the race* is one which features a number of times in the Apostolic writings, and in each place where it is referred to, a different aspect of that race is emphasised.

FORGETTING THINGS BEHIND

In our New Testament reading for today, the Apostle Paul speaks of how he has forsaken everything (or, laid aside every weight) for Christ’s sake:

“... this one thing I do, *forgetting those things which are behind*, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, *I press toward the mark for the prize* of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13-14).

Paul was a man of high standing in the Jewish world of his day. He was “circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the ecclesia; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless”. He was brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, and was therefore as learned in Jewish things as the best of the Jews. But he forsook all for Christ’s sake:

“What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss ... and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ” (Phil. 3:7-8).

Considering the best that this world could offer him as being mere refuse - a hindrance to his entry into the Kingdom - Paul cast it all aside, and instead chose a life of persecution and poverty for Christ’s sake. Truly he could say that he forgot those things which were behind, as he pressed towards the mark for the prize of Christ’s granting.

But can that be said of us? The Master himself warned: “remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:32). She could not forget the things which lay behind her, as they pressed onwards to the refuge of Yahweh’s granting. In her heart, she turned back to Sodom – and so became consumed in the judgements that Yahweh brought upon that place, as she petrified into a salt-pillar. The example is plain; we must forsake the things of this world, in order to be granted the riches of the Age to Come. We must follow the example of Paul, and rid ourselves of anything that might hinder us in the race. Just like a runner, who does not want to be laden down with baggage on the race track, even so we should cast aside “every weight” which will make our strivings more difficult.

COMPETING ACCORDING TO THE RULES

Again, in 2 Timothy 2, the Apostle uses the same figure under Spirit-guidance:

“... and if a man also competes in a game, yet is he not crowned, unless he competes according to the rules” (2 Tim 2:5 TS).

Here, a different aspect is being emphasised: we must “strive lawfully” as the AV has it, or strive “according to the rules”. We are the servants of the Most High God, and as such, we must run the race on His Terms. In a natural race, there are rules that must be followed in order to succeed. If the rules are broken, then even if the runner reaches the finishing line first, he will not be granted the victory. The rules prohibit performance-enhancing drugs, ensuring that men only run according to their natural ability. They outlaw interfering with the competitor’s running, such as seeking to place obstacles in their way, or tripping them up. The rules are many and varied, but the objective is to ensure that no man has an unfair advantage over his fellows, so that the victory is gained fair and square.

To some extent, the race that we are running is like that. Disciples of Christ are forbidden to contrive an advantage over their fellow-runners. To do so, is to adopt the ways of the flesh, something which is outlawed. They must not seek to hinder their brethren who are running with them, and must not seek to present a show of being better than them, running faster than them, like the athlete who takes steroids. Rather, all must run together, in harmony.

BEING SELF-CONTROLLED

1 Corinthians 9 focuses our attention on further aspects of the race: the need to be self-controlled, with our minds set on the coronal wreath of glory:

“know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man who competes controls himself in every way. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible” (1 Cor. 9:24-25).

Every man who competes in the race “is temperate in all things” as the AV has it, or “controls himself in every way”, as another rendering has it. Every man who runs must be self-controlled, ensuring that no energy is wasted, but that rather every action is governed by an overwhelming desire to reach the finish-line.

So it is in the race for life. There is no scope in our endeavours for resources and energy to be used in ways which do not assist us in our journey to the Kingdom. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His Righteousness” is the exhortation of Christ, as he encourages us from the finishing line (Mat. 6:33). If we truly seek the Kingdom above all other things, those other things will not find any undue attention in our minds, but rather, we will be running with singleness of heart to win the race.

“Temperance”, or “self-control” is something which must be added to a knowledge of the Truth that saves:

“giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance ...” (2 Peter 1:6).

It appears to be thought by some, that all that is needed to gain entry into the Kingdom is knowledge. That the primary goal is to accumulate as much knowledge as possible, and that this knowledge will secure our redemption. But like most half-truths, this is only part of the picture. Yes, a knowledge of the ways of Yahweh is essential – for how can we walk in them, if we don’t know what they are? But more than this is required. Knowledge is only one of seven qualities to be possessed by the believer, as described by Peter in this place. We must add to our knowledge temperance, or self-control, that we do not seek to accumulate a wealth of understanding to appear to be more clever than other men, but that we rather direct our knowledge in wise ways, to the benefit of others, abstaining from every work of the flesh.

THE CORONAL WREATH OF GLORY

The other aspect emphasised in 1 Corinthians 9, is that of the reward:

“Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible”.

The word for “crown” here, is the Greek *stephanos*, and refers to the coronal laurel wreath which was awarded to victors at the Olympic Games. It was a token of how they had overcome; that all their endeavours and efforts had been worthwhile, as they had proved themselves to be worthy of it. But this crown was a fading one; it was corruptible and would not last for very long in the grand scheme of things. Men strove to obtain it, yet once they did, it quickly faded away into dust. But the crown which we seek after is an incorruptible one, one that “fadeth not away” (1 Pet. 5:4) – a golden crown of incorruptibility. Paul expresses his desire to be granted one of these wreaths, when Messiah comes again:

“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Tim 4:7-8).

Ordinarily, only one of the runners would be granted the wreath – but in this case, it is granted to Paul, and also “all them that love (Messiah’s) appearing”. Here is a multitude of victors. This is where the race that we run is different to the Olympic Games: whereas there, men compete *against* each other so that one is seen to be better

than his fellows, in our case, we must all run *together*, seeking to help each other to the finishing line. This is the exhortation:

“Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed” (Heb. 12:12-13).

Whilst men of the flesh look on with delight, as those who compete against them begin to flag under the strain, men of the spirit will bear each other up in the way. The weary hands and knees which we are exhorted to lift up are not our own in this place, they are the hands and knees of our brethren. “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” is the exhortation given elsewhere (Phil. 2:4). We must never forget that left to our own devices, we could never finish the race. Growing weary in the way, we would soon give up, and consider the Crown to be unobtainable. But the race we are running is not to do with getting to the finishing line first – Christ has already done that. He has the *Stephanos*, emblematic of his success in overcoming the world, and he will cause his brethren who run after him to be a partaker in his glory. Here then, is a powerful exhortation given by the Apostle: let us look unto Jesus, the One who is at the finishing line encouraging us along the way. And “let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily best us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us”.

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