

Running and Fighting

In our New Testament reading for the day, the Apostle Paul likens the believers' lives to those devoted to winning in the Olympic Games of his day. So we read:

“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 that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore run, not as uncertainly; **so fight I**, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway” (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

The comparisons being made in these words are to do with competing in both running a race, and fighting an opponent – we shall look at these two aspects in turn.

RUNNING

The apostle uses this metaphor elsewhere, in connection with the Lord Jesus Christ:

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

Here, the Lord is presented as One who single-mindedly sought the victory in the race of life. He competed, striving against sin (vs 4), and has already beaten his opponent. Hence he is the “forerunner” (Heb. 6:20), who has gone before, and waits for us at the finishing line. We must fix our gaze upon him, and be strengthened in our endeavours by his example, lest we grow weary and faint (vs. 3). Having an intense focus on the way ahead, we must not be distracted by our previous defeats and failures. We must put them to one side and attend to the task in hand. This is what the Apostle did, and exhorts us to do:

“... 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).

The Apostle had a lot to cast aside in his endeavours to win the race. Not only did he have the blood of the saints on his hands (formerly being Saul the persecutor), but he also had to leave behind the present day advantages and position in his own nation. Of these he writes: “... but what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ” (Phil. 3:7-8).

The call of the disciple of Christ is a call to deny oneself, take up the cross, and follow him. Leaving aside worldly considerations – and indeed benefits – we must forsake and “lay aside” everything that might be extra baggage, hindering our performance in the race. The Apostle Peter said to the Lord: “Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?” (Mat. 19:27). And in response, the Lord promised him a glorious future, sitting upon a throne with the Son of Man. But not he only, for the Lord continued:

“and everyone that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life” (Mat. 19:29).

The Apostle Paul left many things behind, counting them to be but “dung” compared with the glories of the Age to Come. In other words, not only did he count them to be as nothing, they were now abhorrent to him, as repulsive as dung. No longer did he enjoy the pleasures of sin, but instead forsook all to follow the Master, living a life of purity and devotion to him.

TEMPERANCE

The Apostle continued to describe the need for “temperance”, or self-control:

“And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things ...” (1 Cor. 9:25).

As we say, the word here signified “self control”, and another rendering has it: “controls himself in every way”. Peter also speaks of this, describing those things which we must add to our faith:

“ ... add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience ...” (2 Pet. 1:5-6).

Self control is required of those who would follow the Master. The opposite is to be out of control, blown about by every adverse circumstance and wind of doctrine. Rather, we must be firmly fixed by the anchor of faith (Heb . 6:19), bearing a steady course to our ultimate destination. Notice, that above, this quality follows up knowledge. Knowledge is required first, so that we know to do what is right in a given situation – and that can only come by the exercise of faith, leaning to do good and not evil (Heb. 5:14).

FIGHTING

The next metaphor which the Apostle applies to the believers’ life, is that of fighting, or contending against an opponent. Hence, he exhorts us to make sure that every blow counts, against our greatest opponent, even sin itself. This also required commitment and discipline. As Paul wrote to Timothy:

“thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please

him who hath chosen him to be a soldier. And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully” (2 Tim. 2:3-5)>

Notice, the situation is slightly different here: although the Apostle continues to make a comparison with those who compete for masteries in the games, the fighting to which he refers is as a soldier, rather a combatant in the Olympics. But the underlying principle is that there is an opponent to be overcome, something which requires devotion and dedication to accomplish the goal. This is an internal struggle just as much as it is external:

“ ... the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would” (Gal. 5:17).

The Apostle also refers to this principle in his Epistle to the Romans in similar terms:

“... for I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members ...” (Rom. 7:22-23).

In these things, we see that the primary opponent that we must fight against ourselves, AKA “the body of sin” (Rom. 6:6), also “the body of this death” (Rom. 7:24). Hence in our chapter, the Apostle writes:

“... so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: but I keep under **my body** and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway” (1 Cor. 9:26-27).

Here is the ultimate opponent – our own individual selves. Hence “though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds;) Casting down **imagination**s and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity **every thought** to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).

Our fight then, is against what Paul defines as indwelling sin (Rom. 7:17), or “sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3). It is against the wiles of our own nature, hence he also describes how: “the motions of sins which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death” (Rom. 7:5). We must be brave in our contending, and fearless in our battle – for there is an eternal weight of glory laid up for those who overcome.

THE INCORRUPTIBLE CROWN

In Scripture, there are crowns to be sought after, and crowns we ought not wear. There is a “crown of pride” (Isa. 28:3) worn by those who command the respect and admiration of men. But by contrast, there is the crown of thorns worn by the Master as a token of his humble submission to the doing of his Father’s Will (Mat 27:29). And there is the crown

of Glory and Honour which was bestowed upon him, after his resurrection to life (Heb. 2:9, see Zech. 6:11). Then there is a crown of life, spoken of by James:

“Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them **that love him**” (Jas. 1:12).

The prerequisite to obtaining this crown, is enduring temptation, and loving Messiah. This aspect of love is referred to again by Paul at the end of his life:

“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).

We know as a matter of fact, that Christ is going to come again: that is amply testified in Scripture, which cannot be denied. We know that Jesus is both the Son of God, and Son of man. We know that there is one God, and not three-in-one - but how does that belief impact upon our relationship to his return? James exhorts: “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the demons also believe and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” (Jas. 2:19-20). Our belief needs to be translated into action, without which our faith is dead. We need not only to believe in the Son of God, we need to love him, and his appearing.

WE ARE HIS WORKMANSHIP

In considering these things, we must always be mindful that we cannot accomplish the victory by ourselves. “for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). Our salvation is fundamentally a work of God: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works ...” (Eph. 2:10). That being so, our winning the race, and our triumph over our opponent is secured by Him: “... I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong ...” (Eccl. 9:11). Natural abilities will not bring us into the glorious victory of the Sons of God – but for those who exercise themselves with spiritual things, there is a crown – a *stephanos* – laid up for them to wear. And unlike the laurel wreaths which faded away, we have the prospect of having “an incorruptible crown” (1 Cor. 9:25) to wear. This is “the prize of the high calling of God” which provides the incentive to obey that calling and allow God to work within us to achieve the victory, that in our salvation, He will be glorified.

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