

The Christian's Race for the Prize

This lesson is a part of the long four-chapter instruction Paul gives the Corinthians. Therein he teaches them how to deal with those weak in the faith, and warns rash, presumptuous Christians to take heed lest they fall, however they may stand at the present. He presents a forcible simile in the running of the race, or the strife for the prize. Many run without obtaining the object of their pursuit. But we should not vainly run. To faithfully follow Christ does not mean simply to run. That will not suffice. We must run to the purpose. To believe, to be running in Christ's course, is not sufficient; we must lay hold on eternal life. Christ says (Mt 24, 13), 'But he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.' And Paul (I Cor 10, 12), 'Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.'

Now, running is hindered in two ways; for one, by indolence. When faith is not strenuously exercised, when we are indolent in good works, our progress is hindered, so that the prize is not attained. But to such hindrance I do not think Paul here refers. He is not alluding to those who indolently run, but to them who run in vain because missing their object; individuals, for instance, who pursue their aim at full speed, but, deluded by a phantom, miss their aim and rush to ruin or run up against fearful obstacles. Hence Paul enjoins men to run successfully while in the race, that they may seize the prize and not lose it by default. In consequence the race is hindered when a false goal is set up or the true one removed. The apostle says (Col 2, 18), 'Let no man rob you of your prize.' It is true, however, that an indolent, negligent life will eventually bring about loss of the prize. While men sleep, the enemy very soon sows tares among the wheat.

The goal is removed when the Word of God is falsified and creations of the human mind are preached under the name of God's Word. And these things readily come about when we are not careful to keep the unity of the Spirit, when each follows his own ideas and yields to no other, because he prefers his own conceit. Such must be the course of events where love is lacking. The strong and the learned desire to be looked upon as peculiarly commendable, while the weak in the faith are despised. Thus the devil has abundant opportunity to sow tares. Paul calls love the unity of the Spirit, and admonishes (Eph 4, 3) that we endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. In Second Thessalonians 2, 10 he proclaims the coming of Antichrist 'because they received not the love of the truth'; that is, true love.

'And every man that striveth in the games [that striveth for the mastery].'

Were he who competes in a race to attempt other things or to make a success of other matters at the same time, he would not gain much; rather he would soon be defeated, lose the race and everything. If he would truly strive, he must attend to no other thing. All else must be neglected and attention centered upon the contest alone. Even then the winner must have fortune's favor; for they who neglect all to run do not all gain the prize. Likewise in the Christian contest it is necessary, and in an even higher degree, to renounce everything and to devote oneself only to the contest. He who would in addition seek his own glory and profit, who would find in the Word and Spirit of God occasion for his own praise and advantage after the manner of the dissenters and schismatics--what can such a one expect to win? He is wholly entangled in temporal glory and gain; bound hand and foot, a complete captive. The race he runs is the mere dream race of

one lying upon his couch an indolent captive.

'I therefore so run, as not uncertainly; so fight I, as not beating the air.'

Paul here points to himself as exemplar and hints at the cause of failure, viz., lapse from love and the use of the divine word in a wilful, ambitious and covetous spirit, whereas the faith which worketh by love is lacking. Under such conditions, false and indolent Christians run indeed a merry race; yet God's Word and ways in which they are so alert and speedy are merely a show, because they make them subserve their own interests and glory. They fail, however, to see that they race uncertainly and beat the air. They never make a serious attempt, nor do they ever hit the mark. While it is theirs to mortify ambition, to restrain their self-will and to enlist in the service of their neighbors, they do none of these things. On the contrary, they even do many things to strengthen their ambition and self-will, and then they swear by a thousand oaths that they are seeking not their own honor but the honor of God, their neighbor's welfare and not their own. Peter says (2 Pet 1, 9-10) this class are blind and cannot see afar and have forgotten they were purged from their old sins, because they fail to make their calling sure by good works. Therefore, it comes about that, as Paul says, they run uncertainly, beating the air. Their hearts are unstable and wavering before God, and they are changeable and fickle in all their ways, James 1, 8. Since they are aimless and inconstant at heart, this will appear likewise as inconstancy in regard to works and doctrines. They undertake now this and now that; they cannot be quiet nor refrain from factional strife. Thus they miss their aim or else remove the goal, and cannot but deviate from the true and common path.

'But I buffet [keep under] my body, and bring it into bondage [subjection].'

The apostle's thought is the same as in his statement above, 'Every man that striveth in the games exerciseth self-control in all-things.' By 'keeping under the body' Paul means, not only subduing the carnal lusts, but every temporal object as well, in so far as it appeals to bodily desire--love of honor, fame, wealth and the like. He who gives license to these things instead of subduing them will preach to his own condemnation, however correct his preaching be. Such do not permit the truth to be presented; this is true particularly of temporal honor. These words of the apostle, then, are a fine thrust at ambitious and self-centered preachers and Christians. Not only do they run in vain and fight to no purpose; they become actual castaways with only the semblance--the color--of Christianity.

Exampmles from Scripture

'For I would not, brethren, have you ignorant, that our fathers were all under the cloud.'

Paul cites a terrible example from Scripture to prove that not all obtain the prize who run. There were about six hundred thousand of them, all of whom walked in the way of God and enjoyed his word and his confidence so completely as to be protected under the cloud and miraculously to pass through the sea; yet among the vast number who ran at that time only two, Joshua and Caleb, obtained the prize. They alone of all that multitude reached the promised land. Later on in the chapter (verses 11-12) Paul explains this fact, saying: 'Now these things happened unto them by way of example; and they were written for our admonition . . . wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.' The design of these dealings of God with Israel is to terrify the pride, false wisdom and self-will; to deter men from despising their fellows and from seeking to make the Word of God minister to their own honor or profit in preference to the honor and profit of others. The intent is to have each individual put himself on an equality with others, each to bear with his fellow, the weak enduring the strong, and so on, as enjoined in the four chapters.

How many great and noble men may have been among the six hundred thousand, men to whom we would have been unworthy to hand a cup of water! They included the twelve princes of the twelve tribes, one of whom, Nahshon, Matthew (ch. 1, 4) numbers in the holy lineage of Christ. There were also the seventy elders who shared in the spirit of Moses, Eldad and Medad in particular (Num 11, 27), and all the other great men aside from the faction of Korah. All these, mark you, strove in the race. They did and suffered much. They witnessed many miracles of God. They aided in erecting a grand tabernacle and in instituting divine worship. They were full of good works. Yet they failed, and died in the wilderness. Who is so daring and haughty he will not be restrained and humbled by so remarkable an example of divine judgment? Well may it be said, 'Let him that . . . standeth take heed lest he fall.'

Well, the example of Israel is one readily understood. God grant we may heed it! Let us examine the apostle's text yet further--his mention of baptism and spiritual food, using Christian terms and placing the fathers upon the same plane with us Christians, as if they also had had Baptism and the Holy Supper. He would have us know, first, the oft-repeated fact that God from the beginning led, redeemed and saved his saints by two instrumentalities--by his own word and external signs. Adam was saved by the word of promise (Gen 3, 15): The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head; that is, Christ shall come to conquer sin, death and Satan for us. To this promise God added the sign of sacrifice, sacrifice kindled with fire from heaven, as in Abel's case (Gen 4, 4), and in other cases mentioned in the Scriptures. The word of promise was Adam's Gospel until the time of Noah and of Abraham. In this promise all the saints down to Abraham believed, and were redeemed; as we are redeemed by the word of the Gospel which we believe. The fire from heaven served them as a sign, as baptism does us, which is added to the word of God.

Such signs were repeated again and again at various times, the last sign being given by Christ in his own person--the Gospel with baptism, granted to all nations. For instance, God gave Noah the promise that he should survive the flood, and granted him a sign in the ship, or ark, he built. And by faith in the promise and sign Noah was justified and saved, with his family. Afterward God gave him another promise, and for a sign the rainbow. Again, he gave Abraham a promise, with the sign of circumcision. Circumcision was Abraham's baptism, just as the ark and the flood were that of Noah. So also our baptism is to us circumcision, ark and flood, according to Peter's explanation. I Pet 3, 21. Everywhere we meet the Word and the Sign of God, in which we must believe in order to be saved through faith from sin and death.

Thus the children of Israel had God's word that they should inherit the promised land. In addition to that word they were given many signs, in particular those Paul here names--the sea, the cloud, the bread from heaven, the water from the rock. These he calls their baptism; just as our baptism might be called our sea and cloud. Faith and the Spirit are the same everywhere, though the signs and the words vary. Signs and words indeed change from time to time, but faith in the one and same God continues. Through various signs and revelations, God at different times bestows the same faith and the same Spirit, effecting through these in all saints remission of sins, redemption from death, and salvation, whether they lived in the beginning or at the end of time, or while time progressed.

Such is Paul's meaning when he says the fathers did eat the same meat, and drink the same drink as we. He, however, qualifies with the word 'spiritual.' Externally and individually Israel had signs and revelations different from ours; but the Spirit and their faith in Christ was identical with our own. Spiritual eating and drinking is simply believing in God's Word and sign. Christ says (Jn 6, 56), 'He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood abideth in me, and I in him.' And in the preceding verse, 'My flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.' That is, He that believeth in me shall live.

'For they drank of a spiritual rock that followed them.'

In other words, they believed in the same Christ in whom we believe, though he was yet to come in the flesh; and the sign of their faith was the material rock, from which they physically drank water, just as we in partaking of the material bread and wine at the altar spiritually eat and drink the true Christ. With the outward act of eating and drinking we exercise inward faith. Had the Israelites not possessed the word of God and faith as they drank from the rock, the act of drinking would not have benefited their souls. Neither would it profit us to receive bread and wine at the altar if we were without faith. Indeed, had not the Word of God come first, the rock would not have yielded water and command faith. Likewise, if God's Word did not accompany bread and wine, they would not be spiritual food nor exercise faith.

So it is ever the same spiritual meat and drink which God embodies in his word and sign, whatever its material and external form may be. Were he to command me to lift up a mere straw, immediately the straw would hold for me spiritual food and drink. Not because of any virtue in the straw, but because it is a revelation and sign of the divine truth and presence. Again, if God's Word and his sign be lacking or unrecognized, the very presence of God himself has no effect. Christ says of himself (Jn 6, 63), 'The flesh profiteth nothing.' He makes that statement because his hearers pay no heed to the words in which he speaks of his flesh, though it is these which make his body the true meat, according to his declaration (v. 58), 'This is the bread which came down out of heaven.' Therefore we are not to regard unduly, as blind reason does, the works, signs and miracles of God; rather we are to recognize his message therein. This is the act of faith.

The apostle refers to a single type—the rock, saying: 'They drank of a spiritual rock that followed them: and the rock was Christ.' By this statement he makes all the figures and signs granted to the people of Israel by the Word of God refer to Christ; for where the Word of God is, there Christ is. All the words and promises of God are concerning Christ. Christ himself refers the serpent of Moses to himself, giving it a typical significance, Jn 3, 14. We may truly say the Israelites looked upon the same serpent we behold, for they saw the spiritual serpent that followed them, or Christ on the cross. Their beholding was believing in the Word of God, with the serpent for a sign; even as their spiritual drinking was believing in the Word of God with the rock for a sign. Without the Word of God, the serpent could have profited them nothing; nor could brazen serpents innumerable, had the Israelites gazed upon them forever. Likewise the rock would have profited them nothing without the word of God; they might have crushed to powder all the rocks of the world or drank from them to no purpose.

According to the general principle here laid down by Paul, by using the rock as illustration, we may say the Israelites partook of the same bread of heaven whereof we eat; and they ate of the spiritual bread of heaven which followed them--Christ. With them, eating was believing in the Word of God, while they had for their sign the bread from heaven whereof they physically partook. Had not this Word accompanied the bread, it would have been simply material food, incapable of profiting the soul or calling forth faith. Christ says (Jn 6, 32), 'It was not Moses that gave the bread out of heaven; but my Father giveth you the bread out of heaven.' And (verse 58), 'Not as the fathers ate [manna], and died.' Even Moses says (Deut 8, 3), 'And fed thee with manna . . . that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by everything that proceedeth out of the mouth of Jehovah.' In other words, 'In the material manna you must not merely see the work--the act of satisfying the appetite--but much rather the word of promise bringing you the bread of heaven; for by that word you live forever if you have faith.'

We may say the same concerning the sea and the cloud. The children of Israel walked under the same cloud that shadows us; that means, they walked under the spiritual cloud that followed them--Christ. Otherwise expressed, walking under the cloud was simply believing in the word of God, the word they had in their hearts, which told them to follow the cloud. Without that word they would have been unable to believe or to follow; indeed, with the word lacking, the cloud would never have appeared. Therefore, the cloud was called the glory of the Lord whose

appearance had been promised. So we see how we must in all things have regard to the word of God. To it faith must attach itself. Without it, either there are no signs and works of God, or else, existing, and regarded with the physical eyes only, without reference to the Word, they cause one to open his mouth in wonderment for a while like everything else which is new, but they do not profit the soul nor do they appeal to faith.

Some take the words 'which followed them' to mean that the spiritual rock accompanied the children of Israel, companionship them--'comitante petra,' not 'petra consequente,' Christ being spiritually present in the word and by faith. This view they endeavor to base upon the Greek text. I have rendered it: 'the rock following.' The point is not worth contention. Let each understand it as he may. Both interpretations given are correct. I hold to what I have offered because all the circumstances of the incident, and earlier words of God, pointed to a future Christ, a Christ who should follow, in whom they should all believe. Thus Abraham saw behind him the ram in the thicket and took and sacrificed him; that is, he believed in the Christ who afterward should come and be sacrificed.

Again, some say the common noun in the clause 'and the rock was Christ' means the material rock; and since Christ cannot be material rock they explain the inconsistency by saying the rock signifies Christ. They here make the word 'was' equivalent to 'signifies.' The same reasoning they apply to certain words of Christ; for instance, they say where Christ, referring to the Holy Supper (Mt 26, 26), commands, 'Take, eat; this is my body'--they say the meaning is, 'This bread signifies, but is not truly, my body.' They would thereby deny that the bread is the body of Christ. In the same manner do they deal with the text (Jn 15, 1) 'I am the true vine,' in making it 'I am signified by the vine.' Beware of such reasoners. Their own malice has led them to such perverting of Scripture. Paul here expressly distinguishes between material and spiritual rocks, saying: 'They drank of a spiritual rock that followed them: and the rock was Christ.' He does not say the material rock was Christ, but the spiritual rock. The material rock was not spiritual, and did not follow or go with them.

The explanations and distortions of such false reasoners, are not needed here. The words are true as they read; they are to be understood in substance and not figuratively. So in John 15, 1, Christ's reference is not to a material but a spiritual vine. How would this read, 'I am signified by a spiritual vine'? Christ is speaking of that which exists, and must so be understood--'I am'; here is a true spiritual vine. Similar is John 6, 55, 'My flesh is meat indeed.' The thought is not, 'My flesh signifies, or is signified by, true meat'; spiritual meat is spoken of and the meaning is, 'My flesh is substantially a food; not for the stomach, physically, but for the soul, spiritually.' Neither must you permit the words 'This is my body' to be perverted to mean that the body is but signified by the bread, as some pretend; you must accept the words precisely as they mean-- 'This bread is essentially, by a real presence, my body.' The forcing of Scripture to meet one's own opinions cannot be tolerated. A clear text proving that the infinitive 'to be' is equivalent to 'signify' would be needed; and, even though this might be proven in a few instances, it would not suffice. It would still have to be indisputably shown true in the place in question. This can never be done. Now, the proposition being impossible, we must surrender to the Word of God and accept it as it stands.

Christ has been typified by various signs and objects in the Old Testament, and the rock is one of them. Note first, the material rock spoken of had place independently of man's labor and far from man's domain, in the wilderness, in desolate solitude. So Christ is a truly insignificant object in the world, disregarded, unnoticed; nor is he indebted to human labor.

Further, water flowing from the rock is contrary to nature; it is purely miraculous. The water typifies the quickening Spirit of God, who proceeds from the condemned, crucified and dead Christ. Thus life is drawn from death, and this by the power of God. Christ's death is our life, and if we would live we must die with him.

Moses strikes the rock at the command of God and points to it, thus prefiguring the ministerial office which by word of mouth strikes from the spiritual rock the Spirit. For God will give his Spirit to none without the instrumentality of the Word and the ministerial office instituted by him for this purpose, adding the command that nothing be preached but Christ. Had not Moses obeyed the command of God to smite the rock with his rod, no water would ever have flowed therefrom. His rod represents rod of the mouth whereof Isaiah speaks (ch. 11, 4): 'He shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth; and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.' 'A sceptre of equity is the sceptre of thy kingdom.' Ps 45, 6.



Martin Luther

Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) was a German monk and professor of theology who began the Reformation.

Discipleship, Martin Luther

1 Corinthians