

TRACTS ON THE KINGDOM No. 1

THE RACE AND THE CROWN

1 COR. ix. 24—27.

by Robert Govett

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This is a subject rarely if ever touched on. Why? Because of its difficulties. Let us look at them. Here is the passage with some few corrections required by the Greek.

“Know ye not that they who run in a race run all, but one (only) receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. Now every one that entereth the lists, is temperate in all things: they indeed that they may receive a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so box I, not as one that beateth the air; but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that after having acted the herald to others, I myself should become rejected.”

Put this beside other passages.

1. "Being *justified freely by His grace* through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."—Rom. iii. 24.
2. "The wages of sin is death, but *the gift of God is eternal life* in Jesus Christ our Lord." vi. 23.
3. "*By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast.*"—Eph. ii. 8, 9.

'Now have we not here several contradictions?'—I can fancy some one to say.

- 'Salvation is spoken of as a *gift*. In Romans iv. it is described as the result of *not* working, but believing. It is regarded as something bestowed on God's elect, written in His book of life. Therefore they *are saved* as soon as they believe, and are called thereupon to *rejoice*.'
- 'Here the writer speaks of it as a *prize* to be awarded to desert, as the result of training, effort, self-denial; with the danger of entire loss, even in the case of so faithful a servant as Paul.'

'Now I can't see my way through this. What is a contradiction, if here is not one?'

1. 'I am to work; and I am *not* to work.'
2. Salvation is a *free gift*; and yet a *prize* to be won by effort.'
3. 'Then, as to the issue. I have salvation already, and yet I may lose it.'

This text then, is a stumbling block to many. Calvinists know not what to make of it. Arminians seize on it as proving their views. Wesley applies it after this fashion. 'See! These verses show that there is no certain individual election unto eternal life. Election relates only to the choice of corporate bodies to the enjoyment of the means of grace. There is no certainty as to the final result. Your elect Paul the apostle, may himself, if neglected, be, as he says, a reprobate and lost!'

Here then is the knot. How is it to be untied?

Shall I lay before the reader a similar case, which occurred, in modern astronomy? Some years ago, the most distant known planet (Uranus) occasioned to astronomers' difficulties insurmountable. Its calculated place did not at all correspond to its observed place. *Now* it was in advance of the spot which theory said it ought to occupy. *Now* it was in the rear of it, What was the reason of this? Some suggested that the error lay in the mistakes of the astronomers who observed the planet. No! The real place and the theoretic place could not be so made to correspond, or indeed by any known means. How was it to be accounted for?

Some suggested that at so vast a distance as is Uranus from the sun, the force of gravitation had lost somewhat of its power. That was very like upturning the whole system of astronomy.

At length the thought occurred—'Perhaps a planet hitherto unknown, lying at a distance beyond Uranus is working all this perplexity.' The sky is searched, and the concealed disturber of the orbit is found. This new link restores all to order. Gravitation abides in all its undiminished power; all is set at rest. Perplexity is replaced by a happy discovery.

It is even so in the present instance. As long as it is supposed that but *one* object is presented before us in the New Testament, this contradiction and confusion of thought will exist. There is a *second* object in the field of Scripture; the perception of which reduces all texts on the subject to harmony.

Holy Scripture offers to our notice two things, (1) **ETERNAL LIFE**; and (2) **THE MILLENNIAL DAY**.

1. To the ungodly God presents *eternal life* as His *gift*. 'Believe in the finished work of Jesus for you, and you are saved in Christ. Rejoice.'

2. 'But when you have become a believer, and are already possessed of eternal life, there is a *prize* set before you, to be sought for by diligence and effort. You are *elected* to eternal salvation. But a place in the glory of the thousand years is a *reward* to be granted by Christ according to works.'

THE PRIZE.

The *gift* of God, believer, you cannot lose. But the *prize* you may lose. The first and blest resurrection is a *reward* to those "*accounted worthy.*" The kingdom of heaven, or the age of glory to come, is thus set before you as an object to be sought: Matt. v. 1—12; vi. 1—16; Luke xx. 34—36; Rev. xi. 18; xxii. 12; Luke xiv. 12—14; 2 Thess.i,v, 11.

Eternal life is *not* something to be sought by the believer. It were unbelief, He is saved already. Eph. ii.

But the kingdom of the thousand years he is commanded to seek for. *It is unbelief and disobedience not to do it;* Matt. v. 20; vi. 33; vii. 21; Luke xii. 31; Phil. iii. 14; Rev. ii. 26, 27; Col. ii. 8.

It is then concerning a part in the millennial kingdom that Paul is speaking in our text cited from 1st Corinthians. It is to *that* that he refers, wherever he is speaking in that Epistle of gain or loss: 1 Cor. iii. 1—17; vi. 1—11; xv. 21—28. The apostle is writing throughout to saints justified by faith; and sets this kingdom of glory before them as the prize to be won. In this Epistle he treats of the present exclusion of believers from the church for certain offences. That is a witness of the future exclusion of some believers from the millennial kingdom. There are offences for which the Spirit of God directs that the guilty be excluded from present fellowship at the table of the Lord: 1 Cor. v. 11—13. For *the same offences* the Holy Spirit declares, that offending believers will be excluded from the millennial kingdom; I Cor. vi. 8—11.

Many, many will receive the *gift*, who will fall short of the *prize*. This then takes away all perplexity from the passage cited for our consideration. The gift of salvation is 'bestowed on faith.' The prize is something to be sought for by effort. When Paul says—"Lest after having acted the herald to others, I myself should *become rejected?*"—Of what is he speaking? Of eternal life? (or salvation?) Does he mean that if you gain not the glory of which he treats, you are lost forever? By no means! He is speaking of the *prize*, not of the *gift*; of the reward of the thousand years; not of eternal life.

That appears on the very face of the matter. He is illustrating the subject by a reference to the Grecian games.

1. Now who might contend for the prizes there offered? *Only freemen of Greece. Slaves and foreigners were forbidden.* It is just so here. Who may seek for God's prize? Not the slaves of Satan and the world; only God's freemen in Christ?

Paul was accepted in Christ; certain of eternal life. At the moment he wrote he was well pleasing to his Master; his fear was, lest he might turn from the course of self-denial and labour which he was then pursuing, and so *become disapproved*.

2. What was the result to those who, in the Grecian games, failed of the prize?

Say that a hundred and fifty started in the race. A hundred and forty-nine come short. What is to be done with them? Are they to be crucified on the racecourse? Nonsense! There were ten who lost the prize by but *half a second!* So nearly did they press on the winner! It was vexation enough to them to lose the prize; but there was no punishment to be added to their loss.

BUT HOW IS THE PRIZE TO BE SOUGHT?

We may regard the matter from three points of view; in reference to (1) the RACE; (2) the **TRAINING**; and (3) the **PRIZE**. The apostle illustrates the matter still from the games of antiquity.

1. THE RACE.

The stadium, or distance to be run, was about two hundred yards. The candidates were arranged in line, awaiting the signal for the contest to begin. That once given, all was zeal, activity, and unslackening effort pressing forward to the goal! All that might entangle, hinder, or weigh down the racer had been thrown off; Heb. xii. 1, 2. Many were striving; only one could obtain the wreath of victory. Each therefore was obliged to put forth his utmost efforts, in order to bear away the prize from competitors so nearly equal with himself.

But "*one* receiveth the prize." If three or more came into the goal so evenly that the judges could not detect any difference in favor of one, these three must contend anew, till one alone be declared superior.

The apostle's exhortation hereupon is—'Do you imitate this zeal! Do you strive, as if only one was to be crowned, and you were to be that one? It is not the case in regard of God's prize, but that one can win it; but strive as if it were so.'

You, believer, *are to seek this as an object*. "*So run, in order that ye may attain.*" "That ye may obtain," is a word to all Christians. What shall we say then to those Christians who would exclude all seeking for "*reward?*" Who think it 'mercenary?' That they are certainly in error. *God* bids us to seek reward from Him as an object to be pursued. "*So run in order that you may obtain.*" "There be eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs *for the kingdom of heaven's sake*. *He that is able to receive it, let*

Him receive it.—Matt. xix. 12.

Ambition of glory from God is a holy desire. “When thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind. And thou shalt be blessed, for they cannot recompense thee; *for Thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.*”—Luke xiv. 13, 14. “Go and sit down in the lowest room, that when He that bade thee cometh, He may say—’ Friend, go up higher;“ *then shalt thou have glory in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee.*” 10. “Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or child, *for the kingdom of God’s sake*, who shall not receive manifold more *in this present time*, and in the age to come (*aioni*) life everlasting.”—Luke xviii. 29. The present age is the time to surrender, with a view to the kingdom of glory; and while the recompense begins here, it is to be received in full in *the age to come*, or the millennial *kingdom of God*. So also Rom. ii, 5—16; 1 Pet. v. 1—4.

2. THE TRAINING FOR THE RACE.

- (1) That was something that might be regarded as *necessary in itself*, in order to develop and strengthen the muscles used in running; and to give strength of lungs, so necessary to maintain the fleetness of foot to the end of the course. It is evident, that the untrained racer, other points being equal, would have no chance of success against the practiced candidate.
- (2) But the rulers of the game also required it. For ten long months previously the candidates were put under a severe system of diet and exercise. All was directed to remove superfluous fat and flesh; and to impart tone and vigor to the whole frame. The amount of food and its quality, and the preliminary exercises were all arranged; and must be submitted to by those who sought the prize.

Paul is showing, against the too great license and self-indulgence which the Corinthians were allowing themselves, as attendants at the idolatrous feasts, etc., that self-denial is by God called for from those who would at last win glory from Him. We who are believers are undergoing God’s training; we may not live after the flesh, nor draw as near to the world, or seek its prizes, as others do. The apostle, therefore, displays to us in the preceding chapter his own self-denial. While, as an apostle, he might justly have demanded the supply of all his wants by those to whom he ministered the truth which saves, and to whom he communicated the supernatural gifts by the laying on of hands, yet he gave up his claims, and wrought with his own hands to support himself. Now this would turn to his glory and reward at the appearing of Christ. Thus his conduct stood out in sharp contrast with theirs. They went into things unlawful, which would shut them out from Christ’s reward and approval. *Paul* gave up his just rights, and abstained from things lawful, lest he should lose the commendation of the

Saviour, and the glory of the first resurrection.

3. THE PRIZE.

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

What was the object that led to so much abandonment of ease and comfort? Which demanded so much effort, so much expenditure of time and money? Which cost so much anxiety?

Suppose yourself the favored one! What have you won? A wreath of parsley or olive, of bay or pine! *That* was the prize! Soon withering; soon crumbling to dust, however carefully preserved.

But ours is a prize worthy of God, worthy of our best effort-s. Is it not an object worthy to be sought, the entrance into the glory of the thousand years? And in that kingdom, as in the Roman Empire, there are crowns for various services prepared to adorn the brows of the victors.

For the life of a citizen saved in battle one kind of crown was given by Rome; for the brave warrior who first forced his way into an enemy's camp, another. In the kingdom of God the same thing obtains; and the conqueror will wear forever his unfading crown; 1 Pet. v. 4; Rev. ii. 10.

Observe again, the Christian's true position as evidenced both by Paul's example and exhortation, is to be a seeker of reward from God. “They do this to obtain a corruptible crown; but we (*do it with a view to obtain*) an incorruptible.”

At the close we are presented with Paul's own example.

He, who knew best the value of the prize, strove the hardest to win it.

“I therefore so run, not as uncertainly.”

1. Here we have the apostle as the *racer*. He was pressing on to the goal, not content with the past; not boasting of his previous surrenders and deeds, but eager to finish his course with joy. Great was his diligence, great his self-denial, great his sufferings for Christ. Hunger he bore, thirst, nakedness, fatigue, shipwreck, prisons, stripes, stoning. All were nothing, might he but win the prize of his heavenly calling.

In one other respect his position was greatly superior to those enrolled on the Grecian lists. All entered on the training and the strife, utterly uncertain as to the final result. The man, who had been the most diligent and conscientious in obeying all the rules, and following up all the exercises, might yet lose the prize. Through no fault of his, but owing to the superior vigor of one of his rivals he might be defeated in his hopes. Not so with Paul; not so with the Christian. *The obedient, the self-denying, the diligent servant shall not fail of his reward: "Every one shall receive his own reward according to his own labour."*—1 Cor. iii. "Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give to each *according as his work shall be.*" Rev. xxii. 12.

2. But Paul compares himself also with the *boxer*, The ordinary prizefighter in his exercises dealt blows at an imaginary opponent; or when engaged in the actual strife sometimes missed his blow. Paul did not. He sought to master his body as an antagonist, that unresisted, might deprive him of reward and approval from the Lord in that day. The slothful and unprofitable servant will not enter the hall of the feast, but be left in the darkness outside, with tears to deplore his folly. —Matt. xxv.
3. While Paul was led onward by hope, he was kept to his course of life through fear also. "Lest *after having acted the herald to other*, I myself should become disapproved."

In the games of Greece, a herald arranged the places of the racers, defined the laws of the contest, and gave the signal of the race. This resembled the attitude of Paul the apostle. He proclaimed the coming kingdom and its glories; he called on all believers to seek its prizes, and arranged the training of the candidates. How sad, if one so conspicuous should yet at last be dismissed as unworthy of the kingdom into which his pupils entered! Great would be his fall and vexation, just in proportion as high had been his standing during the day of the contest.

1. Are these things so? Then what shall we say to Christians who say? --'Let me only be saved, that is all I care for! If I get just within the door of heaven, it will do for me!'

I would say—'Brother, if you believe in the Son of God, *you are saved already*. But in the day of the millennial glory, you will grieve as bitterly and as vainly as Esau, if you find that you are dismissed by Christ, as unworthy to enter His kingdom: Heb. xii. 16, 17. To be compelled to wait *a thousand years*, while others are enjoying that bliss! It will seem almost an eternity to have to tarry for salvation, — 'Rise then! Seek this prize! They will not attain it, who does not run. They will not reap, who do not sow.'

2. But there are believers who mix in the world and its pursuits, or are drifting into its pleasure, going as near things hurtful or forbidden, as their own conscience, or the apprehended outcry of their brethren, will permit. To such this passage says—'Brother, it is the training time! You are called to give up even what is in itself lawful, that you may not lose the prize. Better to use self-denial, and to give up the pleasures of a world at enmity with Christ, than be dismissed by him as disapproved, and excluded from His day of reward and glory!'
3. Brethren in Christ! See here an exemplification of the Savior's word—which the children of this age are wiser for their generation than the children of light are for the age to come, its riches and glory.

They put forth all their energies, and make cheerful surrender of many things through hopes of the present life. Shall not the prize set before us by our God animate us to effort and self-denial? We are called to a life of service; not a life of sloth. We are called to a life of discipline, not of self-indulgence. Around us are plenty of examples of laxity of principle and walk among Christians. It was hard to distinguish in many cases between the believer and the world. But our conduct awaits the final decision of the Lord Jesus at His coming. Will He approve it? Or refuse to reward such?

Labour for Christ! Memorable was the saying of a Mohametan warrior. Khaled had, after a long and arduous conflict, proved victorious before Damascus over a Christian champion. No sooner was the fight over, than he mounted a fresh horse, and pushed onward to the front of the battle. 'Rest a moment, (said his friend Derar), permit me to supply your place; you are fatigued with fighting this dog!'

'O Derar,' replied he, '*we shall rest in the world Co come! He that labours to-day shall rest to-morrow.*'

This is true of the Christian warrior and worker. To-day is the day of conflict; to-morrow the day of victory. To-day is the day of training; to-morrow the day of the reward and the crown. Let us spend our time with a view to the coming decision of Christ. Here is a field for true ambition. We cannot desire or seek too zealously the glory that is to be given by Christ. If the glory that comes from man could spur to such zeal, effort, and self-denial, how much more should the approval by Christ and His crowning the conqueror before the great congregation, nerve us to diligence and self-control. Seek the glory that comes from God, and the entry into the kingdom that Christ shall give to those whom He approves!

Has this fallen into the hand of one attempting to be reconciled to God? Have you been seeking, friend, to recommend yourself to the Most High by your good words and works? *That struggle is vain.* You cannot by your efforts win eternal life. It is the *gift* of God to every one who believes His witness about the Son of God as slain for sin and

risen again.

Do not mistake here! No one can be saved, except by the work of *another*; by the death, resurrection, and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Will you accept the *gift of God*? It may be done in an instant. How long does it take to accept a bank note of a thousand pounds? Long? 'Tis done in a second! So may you take God at His word? "*The gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.*"—Rom. vi. 23.

Do you believe the testimony about the Saviour's coming millennial kingdom? After you are saved in Christ, you may then begin to seek that day of glory.

Receive the *gift*, and you may then start in pursuit of the *prize*!

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