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Run That You May Obtain

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Acts 2:1-4; 4:1-2; 6:1-9; 2 Tim. 4:6-8 (R.V.); James 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4; Rev. 2:10 (last clause); 3:11; 1 Cor. 9:24-27.

The closing Lord's day evening of a year, and the associated contemplation of the end of a period of time by which our lives are governed, has the effect on us if we are thoughtful, of throwing our minds still further forward to the end of the years, to the point where we also shall have to say, if not that we have finished *the* course, that we have finished *our* course. Those two are not the same, for we may finish *our* course without finishing *the* course, but we look on to that point, not knowing how soon every one of us shall reach it.

The words in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 should have a very solemn effect on us, a moving influence on our hearts. That which is clearly brought before us is the end of the race and the prize at the end, the crown, and what that crown is going to be: "They do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible".

They "do it" to obtain; those two words 'do it' carry with them a very thorough-going activity. "He that contends... is temperate". If you know literally all that lay behind the words, you would know this is no light thing. For ten months the athletes were in most strenuous training under the eyes of experts, as a preparation for perhaps one event. They had to submit themselves for an extended period, ten months, to the most rigid of regulations; self-restraint was exercised in many directions. It was rigorous and long-drawn-out, it tested every power of endurance, and tried out their hearts in

purpose, meaning, and devotion. It was no short period to be got through quickly; every kind of test was applied, and they submitted to it with all their being. They 'did it' to obtain a corruptible crown, fresh at the time, but faded and brown a week later. Ten months for a short period of worldly prosperity.

The apostle says, "But we also"; we "do it" to obtain an incorruptible crown. The question is, Are we doing it? Now is the time for doing it, the course or our own course may come to an end soon. If we live out the longest, it will be but short. Those getting old feel that after all, life is short, a small thing, because of the things not done which ought to have been done, and there is not now time to do them. These verses bring out two things.

1. They are a great appeal to definiteness of object, and intensity of purpose.

Perhaps one of the most widespread enervating dangers is that of uncertainty of purpose, of vagueness of objective. It seems to me the enemy has made as one of his great purposes and tactics the getting of men and women, especially Christians, into a realm of mere generalities, of preoccupation, that is, being occupied with many things which keep them from the main things of heart and life, which keep the main things from becoming the supreme objective of life - an easygoing mediocrity, something that is not out and out for the world, nor out and out for the Lord, but a generalisation, a mediocrity of life which descends to the state of Bunyan's 'Man with the Muck Rake' turning over the mere rubbish of earth, while in a hand above his head is held a crown of glory. But he is too occupied with the things of earth and does not see; this primary glorious thing is not in view. It is not seen, it is missed. We can be too much occupied with things down here which do not count in the final issue, though they are done *for* Him, they do not count, because they are not done *by* Him.

One of the most widespread perils, and one of the enemy's most successful snares, is subtle working to get Christians to become nominal. It seems all the way through that the enemy has worked with all his might to get Christians to become ordinary, to draw them away from fulness of purpose and definiteness of aim, to create a multitude of Christians who count for far less than they ought to count, to get them on to a common level and standing with nothing striking, startling, or challenge nothing that involves Christian activity, no emergency elements or factors, just a coming and going, always purposing, determining, resolving. They have in front something more, but it comes to nothing. It is like the carrot in front of the donkey; it is still there, but he never reaches it. There is a resolve out there, but it is never reached, never overtaken. At this part of the year, that is the triumph of the enemy, it may be a tragedy, they are words without deeds.

The apostle is seeking to bring home the necessity of living definitely and with a mighty purpose: "Know ye not... they who run... run all" but there is only one prize. Now run as though you are going to be that one. That does not mean that every one will not have some prize, but the point is that you are to run as if there was but one prize. Paul is urging us all to be a Christian like that, so thoroughly, so vitally, and so definitely - as if there was only one crown. That is a justifiable selfishness, Paul is out in wholehearted devotion to the things of God, then he says, "So fight I". Put positively he would say, "I fight, and when I strike I make sure I get somewhere and do not miss my mark." You be sure you are not beating the air and missing the mark with all your sincerity.

What is the good of all your effort if you miss the mark? You will only reach, attain, get somewhere, and your lives will be marked by effectiveness, if you have definiteness of purpose. You can take that

as a challenge, or as a rebuke. Live definitely, live mightily, to know exactly our relationship to the Lord, what we are after in Christ, what we are called to in Christ, what He has set before us as a goal, as an objective to be reached, to have vision for. Where there is no vision people go to pieces, fall apart, and lose cohesion, solidity, and grip, losing their accountability and positiveness; having no vision they count for nothing and cease to be reckoned as a factor, they cease to count for anything definite if vision is lost.

Oh, the need of vision... even here with us, we need to have definite positive vision to know what the Lord would call us to. I would urge all Christians to be quite sure they know the purpose for which God has called us as a people into being, to know that which justifies our existence, our being where we are. Are you quite sure you have definiteness of vision and could write it down? Why are you here and not elsewhere? We are not separate because we want to be different to others and can't get on with them; something very solemn and serious lies behind our existence. What is it? Do you know? You need definiteness of vision. How can you throw your weight, yourselves, heartily into a thing of which you have no definite vision, into something which when you attempt you may find you are beating the air, missing the mark? You may have good desires, be earnest and devoted, but if you are not seeing the thing to which God has called you, you may be as one beating the air. Paul said, "So fight I not as one beating the air." This is a call for clear positiveness of vision. Ask God to give you a vision which will draw out every ounce of your being. Those who go on in the ordinary way, who never take a share, who never come alongside to uphold, who never help and do not count in prayer time are those who have no definite vision. We cannot be like Paul with a vision like his, without it sapping out every drop of our life blood. What he really said was, "I am being poured out as a drink offering" or as Moffat's translation has it: "The last drops of my sacrifice are flowing." It was a vision that effected that, to the last drop.

If I pray for one thing for myself and for you, my beloved friends, it is that our vision shall be clear, strong, and mighty, a people with a vision, a vision that God has given, a heart vision (Eph. 1:18). If you are not sure, will you pray for positiveness of vision that your life may be made to count, that you may have a definiteness of vision, for there is nothing of value without that; that you may work for the Lord and not miss the mark. Your work for the Lord can be no good without a God-given vision. That does not necessarily mean a special mission, a public vocation or some special kind of Christian work, a missionary work, for it is not necessarily that. I must safeguard that, for to many it may be so. Many say, "Let me get out of business and then I will pour out my life." The appeal of the apostle was not to a company like that, it was to a company of ordinary people, some slaves, some in business, wives in the homes, a company of the Lord's people each fulfilling different vocations in home, office, and workshop.

This appeal is to all not to leave that to live for God, but to live mightily where you are. It may be much more difficult to live mightily there for God, but there you may find your position for glorifying the Lord, there you may meet God's end for you. Settle the thing that is holding you, the bogey that saps your vitality. Perhaps you say, "When I get out of this life I will be able to serve God more." Do get rid of that; if God wants you out, you will know. But God will never call you out until you are absolutely faithful where you are, that is against His law. To be restive means your strength is being wasted, God will never call you elsewhere until you are utterly faithful to Him where you are now. It may be a long-drawn-out thing and perhaps He may never move you, but He will show you. It may not be a public vocation, your being wholeheartedly out and out for the Lord will find you your opportunity even at the front door. Wholeheartedness finds its own opportunities, you may develop a wonderful doorstep ministry. Wholeheartedness gives God His chance to give you opportunity.

2. The Crown

"They do it for a corruptible crown, we for an incorruptible". What is this crown? Many have not got clearly defined what is the nature of the crown. We sing hymns, and speak of crowns in a general way as a reward we are going to receive, but do not go further in thought to know what the crown really is. All the passages we have read describe these crowns and what they really are, not gold, not studded with gems, but crowns of life, of righteousness, of glory. What are these? They are not something distinct from what has been here of spiritual and moral value in our life here, but the crown will be the full bloom of what has already been in us here, though perhaps in bud. What I mean is that the sinner is going to get his reward, his corruptible crown. Every man will receive his reward according to his doings in the flesh. What is the reward of sinners? His wages, his crown will be the full ripe fruit of what he has done and been spiritually and morally in this world. Sin is a moral disease working subtly and often imperceptibly in fallen human nature, the end of the sinner will be the consequences of all this reaching fulness, it will be the full effect of the disease. Sometimes here one is overtaken suddenly by some awful malady with devastating results, and when the enquiry is worked out it is found that the seeds were there from infancy, and that it had been working secretly all through the life, and that it was not some sudden thing but that these awful consequences were the fruit. Nonetheless the incorruptible crown is the fulness of what of God is in us now. Incorruptibility is a condition, as corruptibility is a condition. We have incorruptible life now working in us, that life on which time can have no effect, it is in us and with us if we are in Christ, it is that which is eternal, that which is of God working in us now.

What is this crown? When we are released from all else and the fulness of all breaks out in the presence of the Lord, that is the crown. It is the full ripe fruit of what is going on in us now. Our present business is to see to it that what there is of God is ruling us utterly now, is governing us entirely now, and is the great factor in our life.

What are the things in this race? What is this race, this course? Giving up ourselves unreservedly to the Lord and the things of the Lord, and in the end we shall have the full blossom and fruit of what we are now in the Lord; that is the crown.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:12-13 uses another metaphor. The wood, hay, and stubble tested by fire will go up in smoke, and then what have they who built with these materials? Nothing, but they will be saved so as by fire; they will have no crown. But those who built with gold, silver, and precious stones, the things of God, the symbols of the heavenly things, in the testing day will stand, and they will receive a reward. What reward? These things brought to fulness, that will be the crown. There will be no corruption, all will be brought to fulness.

It is possible for believers to work for God in a corruptible way. This is building and working in the flesh. The foundation is Christ, but the building is in the flesh, in wood, hay, and stubble and it is not incorruptible, so it will go. But if the building is of gold and all of God, it will stand, so the last application of the word is this: that our lives have got to be absolutely energised by the Spirit of God that they may be incorruptible. All must come out from God, for all that comes out of the natural man for God is corruptible. That is the tragedy, it will go. It may be for God, but if it is not of God, it will go.

There are three points of application.

1. To the Unsaved

What is the end of your having lived here if today would be the end of your course? How much of the incorruptible can you count on? This is a question of great solemnity. What can I take through into eternity that is of God?

2. To Believers in General

How much of your Christian life is your own effort, your own mind and will, your own energy? And how much, on the other hand, is of God? All there is of a self-energised Christian life and service will go, it will pass out and fail to bring us to that incorruptible crown.

3. To Those Who with all their Hearts are Set on God

A word to those who with all their hearts are set on God, on being all of God, on having nothing of self but everything of God. For such the recognition in this world may be the least, whether we have seen it or not, it is clear that those who went that way were judged the greatest failures by this world. This world has no ability, no capacity for judging spiritual values, it has no scales with which to measure them, the world cannot get these values. Take the Lord Jesus. What is the verdict of the world when He hangs on the cross? The world was divided into three in His day. To the Jew, Christ crucified was a scandal, a stumbling block. To the Greek, foolishness, and to the Roman (whose god was strength and might) weakness, for to them it was weakness for a man to be where he could do nothing for himself. The world was summed up in that threefold verdict. But what is the verdict of the God of eternity, of heaven, the verdict from above: Christ crucified - the power of God and the wisdom of God. There is no scandal to those who know, but glory.

Was Paul a man who lived on this principle of utterness for God? How did his life close? From the world's standpoint he was a failure: in prison, a lonely man, he had had success, but was now a spent force and those who had followed him had turned away from him. But what is the verdict of heaven? He lives incorruptibly. The world is unable to judge. Move out for God and the less will be your appreciation in this world, but more in heaven, where you will be in the sight of God incorruptible. What are you out for? To be something among men, to be great among men, to be a preacher, to be popular etc.? Or are you prepared to take the place of Paul and to be counted as the off-scouring of all? Maybe to be the off-scouring of all will count more than the glories of the world. Maybe those who count themselves as less than the least of all saints have a spiritual value which no mortal can weigh or judge. The measure of the world's popularity is often a measure of corruptibility and the measure of the world's unpopularity is one of incorruptibility. These two things cannot be together. We need to decide before God which it shall be - to be popular now and have the corruptible crown, or to be popular later and have the incorruptible crown.

May the things of heaven become exclusive in our lives.

Let me go back to the first point and ask as never before that we shall live mightily, with definiteness of purpose as in the presence of God and not be where the enemy can gently sidle us out.

Beware of the snares and backwaters of going to business, home, and bed, day after day with nothing for God. It is easy to fall into the obsession of a monopoly, or the engrossment by many things, and to keep out the [vital] things. Many of the Lord's people are constantly coming and going

and never register anything positive. May the Lord make us to count in definiteness, positiveness, and utterness. Some are in that backwater and want to get out but cannot. You had better get co-operation to deal with this or it will cut all the Divine purpose out of your life, and make you one who only lives by routine, you will have missed God's crown - everything incorruptible will have been missed, if you cannot get yourself out you had better get someone to pray with you on this thing. Don't let go until you get to a place of positiveness of purpose, until you are free. You may say you are too tired after your day's work, and that is true on the natural plane, but many of the Lord's people put their tiredness aside and meet with the Lord's people and life from God comes in, and the tiredness is forgotten and there is something for God. Don't be on the natural level, but be out and out for God without reserve. "So run that ye may obtain."