

The Christian Making For Heaven In His Life.

Text: 1 Cor 9:24-10:5

Suggested Hymns:

343, 525, 352, 285, 347

1) A Race To The Heavenly Goal

2) A Fight For The Heavenly Crown

3) A Pilgrimage To The Heavenly Canaan

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 1 Corinthians 9:24–10:5, *²⁴ Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. ²⁵ And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.*

²⁶ Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

¹ Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, ² all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. ⁵ But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

This Epistle contains exhortations. These exhortations are not addressed to unbelievers, but to the Christians. Paul tells the Christians in this Epistle that they must race and fight for the crown of life, and walk the way to eternal salvation. Similar exhortations we find in nearly all of the Epistles.

Do not be surprised, my friends, that you are continually being exhorted and told to improve and to do better. These exhortations are very necessary. For it is an easy thing to come to Christ and to join the ranks of His followers by a true faith in the Redeemer. But oh, what a difficult thing to remain with Christ!

How many people come to Christ and remain with Him only for a short time, and then go away, back to the world and its evil lusts! Consider confirmation classes. How solemnly they swear allegiance to their God and to His Church with tears in their eyes on confirmation day! But how soon many of them drop off and no more show their faces in the church!

Or, take members who have been received into the congregation. What an interest some of them take in the affairs of God's kingdom when they join, but how soon some of them draw back and grow indifferent, and eventually sever their connection with Christ and the Church altogether!

Exhortations to improve and to be faithful are always needed, and no Christian can say that he is perfect, and that he could not do better as a Christian. Is there any one among us who is not weak in some point, and who does not need to be told that with more self-denial and circumspection and zeal, he must make for heaven?

Let us consider *The Christian Making For Heaven In His Life*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Christian's Life Should Be A Race To The Heavenly Goal

The life of a Christian should be, in the first place, a race to the heavenly goal. The Apostle says, ²⁴ *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.*

Paul reminds the Corinthians of a thing with which they were quite familiar. The city of Corinth is situated on the isthmus (a narrow strip of land) which connects Northern and Southern Greece. Close to Corinth, on the isthmus, was the place where the flower of Greece, the strongest and brightest young men, met once in two years for a great national contest in athletic feats.

From all parts people would come to attend the Isthmian games and there was nothing else in which the Greeks, as a nation, took a greater interest. Competitors were trained with the utmost care many months before, and the victors were honoured as if they had won a battle.

One of the leading features of these games were the foot races. There was the race course, called the stadium, which presented an animating spectacle. At

the one end stood the competing athletes, awaiting the signal to start; at the other end was the judge, holding in his hand the prize, whilst all around, rising tier upon tier, were the seats crowded with enthusiastic spectators.

The signal is given, off they start, shouts from the spectators fill the air, on they run, the shouts grow more deafening, some runners lag behind, only a few are in the lead, and finally only one reaches the goal ahead of all the rest.

Now the Apostle compares the Christian life to such a race as they had in the Isthmian games, and says, ²⁴ *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.* What a fine comparison! The Christian life is a race for the prize offered by God to the successful runner.

At conversion we take our place in the race course and have our names proclaimed by the herald. Faith is the starting point, faith in our blessed Mediator and Redeemer who bled and died for our sins and has gained for us eternal life.

Our invisible spectators are the holy angels in heaven with whom there is joy over every sinner who repents. Then comes the contest. We must press on, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before. Every muscle must be strung, every faculty called into exercise. How can a person expect to win the prize who indifferently lags behind and makes no effort?

And endurance is necessary. How can a person reach the goal who runs half way, and then gives up the race because he thinks it is useless, or because he gets tired? And what is the goal? It is life eternal, life everlasting, with unspeakable happiness and bliss.

O how every Christian should make for this goal, and keep on running and running, and not look back nor stop until he has run his full course! For every Christian is sure to reach that blessed goal and to win the prize if only he will run his course to the end.

There is not one just one person in a group of Christian runners who receives the prize as it was in the Isthmian games, only one of a whole family or of a team. Each and every one who runs his full course receives the prize of eternal

bliss; for God says in Matthew 24:13 that *he who endures to the end shall be saved.*

But a Christian should feel as if this prize could slip away from him if he did not run for it with all his might. He should feel as if competitors were at his side whom he must outrun in the race. He should have his mind fixed on heaven continually. His citizenship should be in heaven. He should set his affection not on the things upon this earth, but on those things that are above where Christ sits at the right hand of God.

Are you running for this heavenly goal? Are you straining every nerve and using every faculty that you might obtain the prize? Or are you leisurely loitering in the Christian path and slowly drudging along, doing little or nothing for the kingdom of God, and not straining yourself in the least, while others around you are labouring, working, and giving for the Lord?

Awake from your sleep! Run that you may obtain! Do you not see where this indifference will lead to, which has seized upon you? Slower and slower you walk in the Christian-path. Sooner or later you will come to a standstill, and give up the race for the heavenly goal altogether, and step over from the narrow way that leads to eternal life, to the broad way that leads to eternal destruction.

Let the Word of God rouse you to activity, and put new life into you, and by the grace of God you will run your course to the end, and obtain the prize of eternal life.

2. The Christian's Life Should Be A Fight For The Heavenly Crown

Secondly, the Christian's life should not only be a race to the heavenly goal, but also a fight for the heavenly crown.

The Apostle says, ²⁵ *And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.*

²⁶ *Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified."*

Besides the races they had many other things in the Isthmian games. They had wrestling matches. They had gymnastic exercises of various kinds. They had musical contests. They had fencing with swords. Down in the arena the athletes would perform their feats within sight of enthusiastic crowds looking down upon them from their seats in the amphitheatre.

The winner was always greeted with shouts of joy. And what was the prize which he obtained? Nothing but a wreath made of pine twigs which was placed on his head. And how these athletes practised and toiled and denied themselves things for months that they might win this corruptible crown!

A Grecian philosopher gave this advice, *“If you want to conquer at the games you must be orderly, have no excess in food, must abstain from confections, exercise at a fixed hour, whether in heat or cold, and drink no cold water nor wine.”*

Now as they trained for the contest in the Isthmian games and fought for the crown, so the Christian’s life should be a contest and a fight. But what a difference between the Isthmian contest and the Christian contest!

There everything was play and amusement, a mere beating the air, but here everything is real and earnest work. There are certain enemies against whom the Christian must fight continually. There is a trinity against us, as well as for us, the devil, the world, and our own flesh.

The Apostle says in Ephesians 6:12, ¹² *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*

Remember that the devil is our bitter foe, and the Word of God admonishes us in 1 Peter 5:8–9, ⁸ *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.* ⁹ *Resist him, steadfast in the faith.*

Likewise, the world is always ready to seduce us and to entice us into sin and vice, and we must constantly fight the world which is encroaching upon us, and heed the Apostle’s warning given in 1 John 2:15, ¹⁵ *Do not love the world or the*

things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

And our own flesh is also as dangerous an enemy of our better self as the devil and the world. This is clear from Romans 7:18, ¹⁸ *For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.*

Must we not admit that by nature we are all inclined to that which is evil, and opposed to that which is good? Is not our flesh opposed to God's commandments, and would rather indulge in sin? Must we not fight our own flesh with the affections and lusts so that sin may not have dominion over us?

Do you fight, then, my dear Christian friends? Do you contend against the enemies of your soul? When the devil tempts you to doubt, to misbelief, and despair, and whispers into your ear that you are a fool for believing in Christ, or that you are too great a sinner, and that there is no forgiveness for you, do you resist the old wicked foe and show fight, putting him to flight with the Word of God?

When the world laughs you to scorn because you strive to be a Christian, or lures you into sin, do you stand up for your Christian principles and fight for your own soul?

When your own flesh plays false with you, and you begin to grow sluggish in your Christian calling, indifferent, neglectful in prayer and public worship, or stingy and unwilling to give, do you fight this enemy which is within you? Do you crucify your flesh, and let the Holy Spirit have dominion?

O fight for the crown, for the incorruptible crown, for the crown of life! Discipline your body and bring it into subjection as Paul did, that you do not miss the crown of heaven. For though you do not earn this crown by your deeds, because in God's kingdom all things are by grace, you will surely miss the crown if you do not fight for it.

3. The Christian's Life Should Be A Pilgrimage To The Heavenly Canaan

In the third part of our Epistle the Christian's life is pictured as a pilgrimage to the heavenly Canaan. The Apostle says ¹ *Moreover, brethren, I do not want*

you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, ² all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. ⁵ But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

God delivered His chosen people of Israel from the hands of Pharaoh in Egypt through Moses who led them to the promised land, the land of Canaan. But, although Canaan is only a days' journey from Egypt, the Israelites had to undertake a long pilgrimage through the Arabian desert before they could take possession of the Holy Land.

Forty years it took them to get there. And how wonderfully God provided for them on their pilgrimage! He led them through the Red Sea, and delivered them from Pharaoh and his army who pursued them. He went before them in the pillar of cloud and fire. He gave them bread from heaven to eat, and fresh water to drink. He supplied them with everything.

But why did God not lead them into Canaan straightway? Why did they have to linger forty years in the wilderness? It was because with many of them God was not well pleased. Scarcely had Moses led them out of Egypt, when they rebelled against their God, and desired to be in Egypt again.

None of these deserters would see the land of promise. They had to linger in the wilderness and die in the wilderness, and only two of those who came from Egypt were permitted to enter into the land of Canaan, Joshua and Caleb.

Now this pilgrimage of Israel is to teach us that our Christian life should be a pilgrimage through the wilderness of this world to the heavenly Canaan. And in this pilgrimage God deals with us in a similar way as He did with the Israelites. He delivers us from the prince of hell through the holy Sacrament of Baptism. In the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper He feeds us with the true body and blood of Christ.

Christ is always with us invisibly as He was with the Israelites following them in the rock which gave them water to drink. God does everything for us to lead us to the heavenly Canaan. But in spite of all that God does for us, we may miss that blessed land as those Israelites missed the promised land who rebelled.

We must appreciate what God does for us. We must be thankful to Him for the mercies which He bestows on us. We must seek to please Him, and do according to His will.

It is true it is that not by our holy living, not by our own deeds, we are saved, but solely by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If, however, this faith be on our lips only and not in our hearts; if with our lives we deny what we profess with our lips; if our faith does not produce the fruit of an abiding Christian life, then our faith is a delusion and will not lead us to life.

Examine yourself, then, my friends! Is your life truly a pilgrimage through the wilderness of this world to the heavenly Canaan? Is the way which you are walking in this life the narrow way that leads to eternal life? Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ with a true heart, and does your faith bring forth fruit so that you never grow weary in well-doing and in serving the Lord?

May the Lord grant us all His grace that when our earthly pilgrimage is ended, we reach the heavenly Canaan, that we all fight the good fight of faith and receive the crown of life, that we all run the good course and obtain the prize of victory. Then our life upon this earth will not have been in vain, and we shall praise our gracious God and Lord forever and ever. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.