

## THE RACE, THE PRIZE, THE COURSE

UNDOUBTEDLY the Apostle does in two of his epistles more or less clearly represent the Christian as running a race to win a prize. But as is usual with all figures and parables there seems to be room for slightly divergent views of his meaning, or rather of how to apply his figure of speech to the recognized facts. Let us be glad that the facts are generally very clearly seen. This is the important matter anyway.

Shortly before St. Paul was executed he wrote, "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." (2 Tim. 4:7,8.) If this was written six months before he died or even one month or only six days should we understand it to mean that the day before he wrote or the year before it would not have been true? We think not. We must believe also, that when, some time before, the same Apostle wrote, "I am in a strait betwixt two" as to choice between living and dying, he must have felt equally sure that he was at the mark which would win for him the great prize.

But we cannot assume that the Apostle was *always* at that *mark* which would win for him the prize. Surely he, like all of us, was first *begotten* of the Spirit and subsequently *quickened* of the Spirit. Surely during the period between the begetting and the quickening neither he nor we could be at the "*mark*" for the prize.

There must, therefore, be recognized *a mark* or standard of character necessary to the overcomers, which is not possessed at the beginning of the course nor usually for a considerable time thereafter – and a mark or character development which may be possessed a considerable time before death. Since "*love* is the fulfilling of the law of God" is it not proper that we consider it to

be the mark or standard? We have, therefore, assumed that PERFECT LOVE is the standard of our acceptance with God to life eternal: and that to die before attaining it would insure our losing the prize, as death at any time after reaching this mark would insure us the crown of life.

Perfect love includes love for God, for the brethren, for our own, for our neighbors and for our enemies; and much of the teaching of the Scriptures is devoted to the outlining of this perfect love and to encouraging God's people to strive for it; for it represents the fruits of the Spirit which must be grown or developed as the fruits of the vine. The pruning of the branches is to bring this fruitage to perfection, for without it the branch will be cut off from the Vine.

True, some things are *imputed* to us from the time we become members of Christ; purity is imputed, but not the fruit of the Vine – Love. That must be developed. Hence it behooves every Christian to run, to strive, to attain this acceptable standard or mark. All of this is surely true whether the Apostle had in his mind a race illustration or not.

When the Apostle exhorts, "Having done all, *stand!*" it implies that the race has been run, the acceptable mark of character attained before death. And is it not thus with all the "overcomers?" Did we not begin our Christian experience with a mere duty-love toward God and the brethren? Did we not "go on unto perfection" – progressing toward perfect love? True, the Apostle says, "Not as though I were already perfect" – and we with him may well disclaim *actual* perfection. But from the time he *in heart* reached the mark of perfect love, the righteousness or perfection of the Law was reckoned or accounted to him. Hence he adds, "Let as many [of you] as be perfect be thus minded."

But what, if anything, is expected of those who reach this mark of perfect love? Ah! very much! Only after they reach it do they begin to tread in the footsteps of Jesus around and around that mark on its every side. Being actually perfect our Lord needed not to run

to get to the mark, for he was actually there, even as the perfect man. It was for him to "stand" firmly and uncompromisingly at this "mark" as it is exhorted of us that after "having done all" we should stand complete in him. This *standing* at the mark is the real trial, the real test. To stand is to be an "overcomer" of the world, the flesh and the devil. The [R4050 : page 261] *attainment* of the mark is often tedious and slow, but it should not be. Since it is merely a state of the mind it surely might be attained speedily, whereas from lack of zeal many are long years about it and some never gain it, – are never quickened, and will never, therefore, be born of the Spirit.

It is after we have reached the mark of perfect love that we, like our Lord, must endure hardness and fight the good fight. The encouragement held out is the "far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" promised to those who display special valor in the King's service.

When the Apostle says, "A man is not crowned except he strive lawfully," he in other words is saying that a man must be at the mark of perfect love (the fulfilling of the law) ere his strivings would be meritorious or acceptable in God's sight.

Another possible view of the race is to suppose a line marked out and that line to represent perfect love, each runner being expected to keep as close to that line as possible to the end of life. But this view does not allow for or explain St. Paul's having finished his course weeks or months before he died, nor his "strait betwixt two," years before that.

So then whatever view illustrates the facts best to our minds let us enjoy it, and meantime rejoice that the facts are so clear and plain as to be beyond dispute.

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