

The Mission of Christians 2 – Struggle to Win the “Prize” of the Lord¹

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The most important thing in life is to know the Lord Jesus experientially. It is not until we know the God of salvation that we can live a life filled with truth. The true blessing of life is given when, through an encounter with the living God, you become convinced of the forgiveness of sins, you have peace with God and you receive eternal life. We must have this certainty at the foundation of our life—the certainty that we are loved, led and protected by the Lord Jesus at every moment of every day. Furthermore, the conviction that we will enter into eternal fellowship with Jesus after death and share in His glory is an incomparable treasure. We are compelled to worship the Lord when we think of being together with Him forever. Even after we are blessed to have faith and made the “children of God,” it is extremely important to seek a more profound understanding of the Lord Jesus through daily experience.

This is because we need to become vessels that the Lord can use in this world. So, I would like to continue our discussion based on the Bible from the previous issue, about the mission of Christians—the reason for which we were saved. Paul mentioned in his epistle to Ephesians:

Ephesians 4:13

until all of us are united in the faith and in the full knowledge of God’s Son, and until we attain mature adulthood and the full standard of development in the Messiah.

[International Standard Version]

When Paul proclaimed the message, his purpose was not to look after the brothers and sisters in Christ as if they were “suckling babies.” It was rather for them to be encouraged by the Holy Spirit to become “blameless.” Paul never stopped praying for those brothers and sisters who were given faith and saved by the grace of the God so that they would strive to attain the “eternal crown of victory.”

1. Racing, Boxing and Wrestling

In the New Testament, athletic games are used as an analogy of the spiritual/faith battle of believers. This is to encourage us to increase our faith. So, let’s look at how three athletic games in Greek and Roman times—footrace, boxing and wrestling—are portrayed in the Bible. In particular, it should come to our attention that there are many references to footraces. Just like athletes run toward their goal, we

Christians keep pursuing the goal of the Lord lying ahead, to win the “prize” of God’s heavenly call in the Messiah Jesus.

Philippians 3:14

I keep pursuing the goal to win the prize of God’s heavenly call in the Messiah Jesus.

Boxing implies that our battle is against the enemy who dwells within us. The words of God from the Bible tell us:

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

You know that in a race all the runners run but only one wins the prize, don’t you? You must run in such a way that you may be victorious.

Everyone who enters an athletic contest practices self-control in everything. They do it to win a wreath that withers away, but we run to win a prize that never fades. That is the way I run, with a clear goal in mind. That is the way I fight, not like someone shadow boxing. No, I keep on disciplining my body, making it serve me so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not somehow be disqualified

In reference to wrestling, it is taught that the “power of darkness” surrounding us is the enemy in our battle. This verse is well-known:

Ephesians 6:12

For our struggle is not against human opponents, but against rulers, authorities, cosmic powers in the darkness around us, and evil spiritual forces in the heavenly realm.

In this manner, these three athletic games allegorically imply three different directions of Christians’ spiritual battles.

I would like to expand the discussion on footraces. The most important truth signified by footraces is that “all runners can reach their goal.” Thus, we too can reach our targets when we do His will by means of the strength of the Lord.

All Christians have to be entirely devoted to running toward their goal, to the full extent of their power. We should not be captivated by meaningless things and avert our eyes from the goal. We are not supposed to live aimless lives.

All Christians have to continue running until they reach their goal. We cannot complain for being tired and stop running. We ought to keep moving forward day and night, and we are not allowed to stop for rest. No matter how hard the enemy tries to defeat us, the Lord Jesus protects us. So, we have to keep running without falling away or falling over.

All Christians should always aim at acquiring the best thing. Only when we do this are we given the

1 『キリスト者の使命(2)主の「賞」を得るための戦い』、主は生きておられる 30 号、ゴットホルド・ベック

privilege of receiving the victor’s crown of glory from the Lord Jesus Christ. The rewards given to Christians are explained in the Bible:

2 Peter 1:11

For in this way you will be generously granted entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Messiah.

2 Corinthians 5:10

For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of the Messiah, so that each of us may receive what he deserves for what he has done in his body, whether good or worthless.

2 Timothy 4:8

The victor’s crown of righteousness is now waiting for me, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on the day that he comes, and not only to me but also to all who eagerly wait for his appearing.

To help brothers and sisters understand the necessity of growth and purification, as well as the importance of the battle for faith, Paul explained the struggles of Christians by making an analogy to athletic races. He too kept running throughout his life:

2 Timothy 4:7

I have fought the good fight. I have completed the race. I have kept the faith.

Acts 20:24

But I don’t place any value on my life, if only I can finish my race and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.

Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore, having so vast a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, and throwing off everything that hinders us and especially the sin that so easily entangles us, let us keep running with endurance the race set before us, fixing our attention on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the faith, who, in view of the joy set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

These verses indicate the importance of keeping our attention on our goal and seeking the things above. In the life of any person, the most crucial thing is what that person aims at—what kind of goal he or she has in mind. Our outward behavior is determined by our internal attitude and orientation.

2. Keep Your Minds on Things that Are Above

The Lord Jesus wants to transform our nature into a totally new one. The Lord Jesus helps us to change our thoughts, perspectives and values. However, for

this kind of inner revolution to be accomplished in a true sense—in other words, for anyone to be recreated—it is critical that his or her internal determination, direction of mind, thoughts and intentions be set to “things above”—which refers to the eternal Lord Jesus Himself. The Bible says:

Colossians 3:1-2

Therefore, if you have been raised with the Messiah, keep focusing on the things that are above, where the Messiah is seated at the right hand of God. Keep your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth.

Brothers and sisters who set their minds on things above love the fountain that the Lord God reveals to them—that is to say, the Lord Jesus.

Brothers and sisters who set their minds on things above communicate personally through prayer with the Lord, who is their fountain of life.

Brothers and sisters who set their minds on things above always live a calm and peaceful life of prayer, even in the bustle of everyday life.

Brothers and sisters who set their minds on things above continually pray and give thanks instead of praying from time to time.

Brothers and sisters who set their minds on things above always look up to things above and wish for the Lord to lead them.

Brothers and sisters who set their minds on things above inspire others to perform honest and conscionable deeds in this world, and they aspire for the glory of the Lord Jesus to be manifested in their hearts.

Although brothers and sisters who set their minds on things above carry out their responsibilities in this world, their true purpose lies in heaven.

Brothers and sisters who set their minds on things above all love the Lord Jesus and the Bible, which is the word of God. In the life of those who love the Lord and his word, no day is wasted or meaningless. These brothers and sisters call upon the Lord Jesus to talk to them through the Bible everyday. The whole Bible is the immovable foundation of our faith and life. For brothers and sisters who set their minds on things above, all words from the Lord are “promises” and “instructions.” They are also the “gift” and the “mission” given by the Lord Jesus, which gives us strength and joy to live and steer our life in the right direction. Minds that are set on things above and the joy of reading the Bible work well together.

All words in the Bible are a gift from above. So, those who don’t place enough importance on reading the Bible or neglect to seek the Lord for fellowship and

His words will end up being preoccupied by worldly concerns. They become spiritually poor, and their minds will be controlled by earthly pursuits and eventually turn down the call from above.

If brothers and sisters let their minds stray from the things above, they won't be able to finish the race and reach the goal. Instead of running straight towards the goal, they'll easily get distracted by meaningless things and keep going in circles forever.

However, brothers and sisters who set their minds on things above will be richly rewarded for being sincere and delighting in His word day and night.

Psalms 1:1-2

How blessed is the person, who does not take the advice of the wicked, who does not stand on the path with sinners, and who does not sit in the seat of mockers. But he delights in the Lord's instruction, and meditates in his instruction day and night.

All brothers and sisters who set their minds on things above walk in the statutes of the Lord and will be allowed to observe amazing things.

Psalms 119:18

Open my eyes so that I will observe amazing things from your instruction.

They also find joy in the word of the Lord, just like those who have found a great spoil.

Psalms 119:160, 162

The sum of your word is truth, and each righteous ordinance of yours is everlasting.I find joy at what you have said like one who has discovered a great treasure.

Through the word of the Lord, new strength flows into brothers and sister who set their minds on things above. The eyes of brothers and sister who set their minds on things above look up to heaven, and they commit to moving forward to their goal. Victory is waiting at the end of this race. When the Lord Jesus comes back, their victory will be proclaimed.

3. Perfectly Embraced by the Lord

1 Peter 1:13

Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep a clear head, and set your hope completely on the grace to be given you when Jesus, the Messiah, is revealed.

Those brothers and sisters who prepare their minds for action and keep a clear head always stay alert and set their hope on the second coming of the Lord Jesus. “To prepare our minds” is to place our trust in the grace of the Lord with total confidence. “Grace” is something the Lord Jesus accomplishes for us in an

absolutely different dimension from what humans do. Thus, true runners refer to those who run trusting 100% in the grace of the Lord Jesus. Instead of relying on their own ability, they run the race and pursue the goal where the Lord Jesus reveals Himself.

Philippians 3:20-21

Our citizenship, however, is in heaven, and it is from there that we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus, the Messiah. He will change our unassuming bodies and make them like his glorious body through the power that enables him to bring everything under his authority

We have to clearly set our minds on one eternal goal. If we are uncertain of which way we should head, we won't be able to move forward to reach the goal with the strength given by the Lord. Paul once testified that “I keep pursuing the goal to win the prize of God's heavenly call in the Messiah Jesus” (Philippians, 3:14).

Let's look at this testimony of Paul. Paul begins with the explanation of “calling” to runners. All runners are “called” by no one but the Lord Jesus, and all things are done through the Lord Jesus.

Philippians 3:4-7

although I could have confidence in the flesh. If anyone thinks he can place confidence in the flesh, I have more reason to think so. Having been circumcised on the eighth day, I am of the nation of Israel, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. As far as the Law is concerned, I was a Pharisee. As for my zeal, I was a persecutor of the church. As far as righteousness in the Law is concerned, I was blameless. But whatever things were assets to me, these I now consider a loss for the sake of the Messiah.

Secondly, Paul testified that the spiritual goal of all runners is Jesus, and all races are held to honor the Lord Jesus alone.

Philippians 3:8-9

What is more, I continue to consider all these things to be a loss for the sake of what is far more valuable, knowing the Messiah Jesus, my Lord. It is because of him that I have experienced the loss of all those things. Indeed, I consider them rubbish in order to gain the Messiah and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the Law, but one that comes through the faithfulness of the Messiah, the righteousness that comes from God and that depends on faith.

Thirdly, it was also testified that the efforts and strength of runners are poured into winning the “prize” of the Lord, which refers to a heavenly call from the Lord Jesus.

Philippians 3:10-14

I want to know the Messiah—what his resurrection power is like and what it means to share in his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, though I hope to experience the resurrection from the dead. It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already become perfect. But I keep pursuing it, hoping somehow to embrace it just as I have been embraced by the Messiah Jesus. Brothers, I do not consider myself to have embraced it yet. But this one thing I do: Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I keep pursuing the goal to win the prize of God's heavenly call in the Messiah Jesus.

Fourthly, he stated that what all runners aspired to was to be with the Lord forever.

To be perfectly embraced by the Lord Jesus is the Christians' source of strength. Only those who are embraced by the Lord Jesus will reach their true goal. Paul mentioned that “it's not that I have already reached this goal or have already become perfect. But I keep pursuing it, hoping somehow to embrace it just as I have been embraced by the Messiah Jesus.”

4. Winning the Victory

All kinds of victory help those who belong to the Lord move forward. Brothers and sisters in Christ are strengthened by the ordeals they endure. When people experience the help of the Lord Jesus, their joy is increased.

Let me talk about what once happened in this divinity school. Students were given the assignment to write an essay titled, “The Lord God Almighty and the Devil.” They were only given four hours to write the assigned essay, which consisted of three chapters entitled “the God Almighty,” “Existence of the Devil and His Nature” and “Relationship Between the Lord Almighty and the Devil,” respectively. Naturally, students were expected to write about such things like the generation of evil and the reason why it is allowed, how evil is governed by the Lord God and how the kingdom of darkness is controlled by the kingdom of light.

One student enthusiastically wrote about the almightiness and greatness of the Lord God, His love, wisdom, truth, goodness, mercy and so on. But suddenly, he noticed that the assigned time was coming to an end. He had spent all of his time admiring the Lord Jesus, and his essay was filled with gratitude and joy from beginning to end. When the time was up, he added one last line that said, “No time for the devil” before he submitted it. I don't know how the teacher graded this student, but we can learn so many things from that line: “There is no

time for the devil.”

When our hearts are truly filled with the Lord Jesus, there is no chance for the devil or any kind of evil to sneak in. Such hearts are like a territory that belongs to the Lord. Sins and all the worldly things have no power there, and we will be given a mission from above and a goal to pursue.

If our hearts are filled with the Lord Jesus, our time will belong to the Lord fully. To rejoice in the Lord Jesus is like being protected in a fort that surrounds us. As we are embraced by the Lord Jesus more and more, the power of sin will weaken. As we use more time for the Lord Jesus, our enemy the devil will have less time. There will be “no time for the devil.”

Once, I saw a big oil painting at some art gallery in Koln, Germany. It shows Samson the Judge from the Old Testament. In that painting, Samson is tied up with thin rope, and a little child is dragging Samson the Giant at the other end of the rope. Samson's hair is shaved off and have fallen to the ground. His hair was the proof of Samson's whole life being devoted to the Lord. However, Samson had lost his spiritual power because of his sin. No matter how small the sin is, those who commit sin will be tied up by the devil. Devoting our whole life to the Lord is the key to obtaining true strength. It is only through spiritual fellowship with the Lord Jesus that we can be led to a victorious life.

2 Chronicles 16:9

The Lord's eyes keep on roaming throughout the earth, looking for those whose hearts completely belong to him, so that he may strongly support them.

If brothers and sisters in Christ want to win the victory, they have to surrender themselves to the Lord Jesus. Only those who totally entrust themselves to the Lord Jesus will be truly blessed and celebrated.

Lives of the true runners should not be like an ellipse with two centroids—one at the self and the other one at Jesus Christ—between which they wander back and forth. It has to be a true circle, with just one center—which is the Lord Jesus. We would like to pray to the Lord from the bottom of our hearts to let us live out our lives as true runners.

Colossians 1:18

He is also the head of the body, which is the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he himself might have first place in everything.