

The Incorruptible Crown.

Text: 1 Cor 9:24-10:5

Suggested Hymns:

206, 304, 180, 352, 132

1) Is A Free Gift Of God

2) Must Be Persistently Sought After

3) A Word Of Warning

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, *²⁴Do 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. ²⁵And 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.*

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

¹Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, ²all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. ⁵But 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,

Near the end of our text it says, *But with most of them God was not well pleased.* He declared so, saying that they would not enter the Promised Land. Of the 600,000 men that went forth out of Egypt from twenty years old and upward, only two lived to enter Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey.

The others were overthrown in the wilderness because of their disbelief. They all had the same advantages. They were all under the leadership of Moses,

the servant of God. They all witnessed the mighty works of Jehovah in Egypt, and at the Red Sea.

They had all been guided by the cloud which gave them protection against Pharaoh's mighty army and against the hot rays of the tropical sun and gave them light by night. They had all enjoyed God's gracious benefits of bread from heaven and the refreshing water from a rock.

In short, the goodness and the power of God had been shown to all of them. In spite of all of this some people they rebelled and doubted. Some forsook God for the golden calf, some in dissatisfaction coveted the honour God had bestowed on Moses and sought to usurp the leadership for themselves.

Some believed that they could not conquer the enemy in the land God had told them to go in and possess. For this sin they perished. Not that all souls were lost. We know many repented. Some were lost, such as Korah,¹ who was swallowed up by the earth. Others found peace and pardon with God, as was the case with Aaron and Miriam. But with many God was not pleased because they did not run the race right.

How is it with us today? Is God pleased with the conduct of all who call themselves Christians? Are we running the race so that we may obtain the crown? Our text says, *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.*

Let us therefore consider *The Incorruptible Crown*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. This Crown Is A Free Gift Of God

The apostle here encourages the Corinthian Christians to perseverance in faith. He alludes to the Isthmian games. With these athletic contests the Corinthians were familiar as they were held biennially near their own city. The winner in the national events received a crown of bay, laurel, or of olive leaves. This was indeed an honour, but the prize soon perished.

The conclusion that the apostle would have his readers draw is this: If those who took part in the Isthmian games so earnestly and at such expense and effort

sought a crown that faded, how much more should Christians seek the incorruptible crown!

We learn in Revelation 2:10 that there is in store for every believer a crown of life. Jesus promises it to those who are faithful unto death and admonishes us to be faithful unto death so that no man may take it from us.

Since our dear Lord speaks so much of it and so earnestly urges us diligently to seek it, we might well ask, *What is it?* The hope of our calling is the riches of the glory of the inheritance of the saints. It is to live under the grace of God here and to dwell with Him forever. All this is a free gift of God.

Just as God freely, out of compassion, brought Israel from the bondage in Egypt to the possession of Canaan, the land abounding with temporal riches, so He in mercy has delivered us from sin and given us, inestimable peace and righteousness.

Heaven is now our home, where there is no more sin or sorrow, suffering or sighing, where there is fullness of joy and pleasure forevermore. God has prepared this in Jesus, His Son, our Saviour. He has freed us from the damnable power of sin and Satan, given us a good conscience, and reconciled the Father by His meritorious obedience and sacrificial suffering and death.

Because Jesus lives, we shall live. All this is ours by faith. We hold it in certain hope, ¹⁶ ***“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”***²

This is the prize held out to those running the Christian race. It is offered in the means of grace. In Holy Baptism, typified by Israel’s passing under the cloud, we are born again, adopted as children of God, and made heirs of eternal life.

In hearing the Gospel, we feed on the heavenly manna, Christ, the Bread of life. Partaking of it, that is, hearing and reading the Word of God, our faith is nourished, sustained, and strengthened. We are made and kept fit for the race.

In the Lord’s Supper we drink of that Rock which was Christ. This close communion keeps us from losing sight of our goal and helps us to run the race. The incorruptible crown, then, is life with God, which He freely gives to those

who come to Him by Christ. It is earned no more than Israel deserved to possess Canaan.

2. This Crown Must Be Persistently Sought After.

To obtain this crown, the Christian must run the race persistently. He now has this crown by faith. It may be lost just as Canaan was not reached by all who left Egypt under God's favour. It is necessary that we strive for this crown with heart and soul till our course is finished.

Here again the illustration taken from the Isthmian contestants is very appropriate. All those who competed in the games there, just like athletes today, prepared themselves by long, strenuous training. There are many things the athlete must do and many things he must abstain from. He dare not indulge in sinful carousals or go to excess in eating and drinking.

Lustful ways, yielding to the appetites of the flesh, weaken him and render him unfit. Then he must practise daily that particular feat wherein he hopes to excel, and to become proficient. In this way he seeks to harden his muscles, to strengthen his lungs, and to make his body immune to hard blows.

In a similar way a Christian must train himself. Salvation by grace implies that one enters the contest for a holy life. Free grace does not permit unrestrained living. Rather does the goodness of God renew our souls and move us to shun and avoid all that displeases Him.

The runner in the race must stay within the lines, observe the rules, and keep his goal in mind. He dare not swerve from the path nor falter or fall. So the Christian has his rules in the Word of God. From these he dare not deviate. The lines are, *"Thus says the Lord."* His goal is the pattern Jesus has set before him.

He dare not look back to the flesh-pots of Egypt, the world, nor listen to the advice of errorists and false teachers. With a new heart, must go hand in hand the new pious life. We who have been baptised into Christ should now walk before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Thus by faithfully adhering to the Word of God, we run the race properly. We read in John 12:48, ⁴⁸ ***"He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him -- the word that I have spoken will judge him in the***

last day. And in John 8:31, ³¹ ***Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you continue in My word, you are My disciples indeed.***

Keep the goal in mind. A football player became confused and forgot which was his goal. Receiving the ball, he ran across the field to the goal, but, alas! it was the enemies', and he did not gain his points. To think that we are right is not enough.

Again, the Christian's effort for the crown is likened to wrestling. We Christians are in daily combat with Satan and the world. We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, and the prince of this world.³ His blows at the soul are aimed with a definite purpose.

These must be warded off and overcome with no uncertain counter-attacks. Every temptation must be met with ***"It is written."*** Luther wrote in the hymn "A mighty Fortress is our God" that ***"One little word can fell him."*** But that word must be known.

Doubt and uncertainty cannot be entertained by a contender for the heavenly crown. He must be ready at all times to strike a direct blow for divine truth against all error. We must seek to become well founded in Christian knowledge and positive in our convictions. Be ready to give an answer to any person who asks you a reason of the hope that is in you without doubt or wavering.⁴ Thus we contend for the truth and war against all error.

Our text continues, ²⁷ ***But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection.*** Our own flesh, i. e., the Old Adam, is prone to wander from the way of the Lord. This foe we constantly carry with us, and he is most persistent. But just as persistently we must always bring our will into subjection to the holy will of God. God determines right and wrong, not we, not our thoughts, not our likes or dislikes.

Self-control is one of the most necessary requisites to persistent running of the race for the crown. Those Greek athletes disciplined themselves most severely to endurance and determination. So we must restrain the will of the flesh. Learn to say "no" emphatically to sinful ways, indulgences, and the pleasures of the world.

If the crown of life is worth anything to us, it is worth our every effort. No cost is too great, no price too dear. Ours is not a passing honour, but an eternal bliss. What a glorious prize awaits us!

3. A Word Of Warning

Our text continues 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.*

In running their race, God's chosen people failed to exercise the self-discipline mentioned earlier. In fact, the reckless and listless Corinthians thought they could safely indulge themselves to the very verge of sin, even to the extent of returning to idol practices. They needed a powerful warning against such a betrayal of their Lord, and Israel's history provided it.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of the high privileges God's people enjoyed in the Old Testament. Every Israelite knew the story of the deliverance of His people from Egypt and their miraculous passage through the Red Sea. Their deliverance and their preservation by the pillar of cloud, and the parting of the Red Sea remind us of our baptism.

The Israelites were saved by water, in the midst of water. We are also saved by the water, with the Word in Holy Baptism. The passage through the Red Sea bound God's people to their leader, Moses, whom God had sent to lead them to safety. We are baptised into the name of our leader, Jesus Christ, and are bound to Him.

The children of Israel enjoyed other blessings. *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.* Christ provided both the water and the manna in the wilderness. Jesus saved His people from Egypt and preserved His people in the wilderness.

Now comes the mournful statement, ⁵ *But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.* Only Caleb and Joshua entered the Promised Land. All the other Israelites over age 20 perished in the desert because they were faithless and disobedient.

The history of Israel should serve as a warning to all Christians who are tempted to flirt with the idolatrous practices of their neighbours.

So let us so run that we may obtain the crown of life. Scripture says, *He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.*⁵ And *You are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation.*⁶ He who freely gives the incorruptible crown will also help us persevere.

Through Word and Sacrament He will make us strong to endure and overcome and to obtain the victory. *We can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us.*⁷ This gift is to those who diligently seek it. May we all do so! May God grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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

¹ Numbers 16:31-33

² John 3:16

³ Eph 6:12, John 16:11

⁴ 1 Peter 3:15

⁵ Philippians 1:6

⁶ 1 Peter 1:5

⁷ Philippians 4:13