

2 TIMOTHY 2:5

COMPETING ACCORDING TO THE RULES

“An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.”¹

Consider the initial verses of this chapter to be among the most significant verses of the letter. They are, as well, perhaps the most neglected verses of the missive which Paul wrote. I realise that I am ploughing quite a narrow furrow with these expositions. Note that the Apostle appeals to multiple metaphors in order to emphasise a truth. He has spoken of a teacher who is teaching a teacher when he writes, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” [2 TIMOTHY 2:2]. Immediately after presenting the image of a teacher preparing a teacher for the future, Paul wrote of a soldier. He urged the younger minister, “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” [2 TIMOTHY 2:3, 4]. Now, he presents the image of an athlete engaged in a great contest. “An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules” [2 TIMOTHY 2:5]. One further metaphor will emphasise the contest in we are engaged—that of a hard working farmer. We will consider that word picture in a message planned for delivery in the near future.

A significant truth that must be stressed in each of the scenarios the Apostle presents confronts modern Christendom—indeed, confronts all of modern life! We are programmed to anticipate instant gratification. To a tragic degree, our modern approach to life is quite infantile. We come into this life demanding attention. We are moved with compassion at the helplessness of a wee bairn; they are totally dependent upon adults for nourishment, shelter, warmth, clothing—we do not anticipate that babies will provide anything for themselves.

However, we expect that infants will mature, assuming responsibility for their own needs. The aforementioned needs will be provided through their own efforts—at least, that is our expectation. Modern life has delivered a new twist on this perception, however. Modern western idealism has conditioned us to refuse to accept responsibility for anything bad that may come into our lives. Moreover, our needs—which never cease—are expected to be provided immediately, perhaps even magically, without any input on our part.

I am not attempting to present a treatise on social aspects of modern life; I am, however, directing our focus to modern church life. Church goers come into the church looking for answers to life’s problems. Churches meeting this expectation through sermons addressing life conflicts appear to prosper in the popular image. In broadest terms, modern religion demands little of participants and promises exaggerated returns. One can live precisely as does the remainder of the world without experiencing deprivation or hardship.

Nevertheless, each example the Apostle uses speaks of delayed gratification. The teacher may rejoice as the student excels his teacher, but the reward of seeing the advance of knowledge to another generation lies in the distant future. The soldier will one day see a cessation of the conflict, but the constant threat of battle demands that he stay alert and that he make constant sacrifice. The athlete will never see the dais unless she exerts herself, depriving herself of sleep, eating a Spartan diet and constantly pushing her body to best her prior times. The farmer receives no crop until he plants the seed; and seed that is planted cannot be eaten.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

COMPETITORS — In our text, the Apostle uses the illustration of an athlete. He uses the Greek verb *athléō*, which speaks of competing in an athletic contest. His use of that word recalls the Greek games. Though the Romans were rulers of what we today identify as North Africa, the Near East or the Mediterranean and European nations, regional customs from the various nations often continued unabated despite Roman rule. The Greek Games were one such custom that continued long after the Romans had assumed the role of empire builders and rulers. These games were still very popular at the time the Apostle was writing.

It is clear from reading what the Apostle has written, that he considers Christians as competitors. Throughout the message I will be stressing that we who believe are not competing against other believers; rather, we are competing against our own desires. Let me explain what I mean. Throughout his writings, Paul warns against succumbing to “the flesh.” By this, he is speaking of surrendering to the desires of the natural man.

In **ROMANS 7**, Paul writes of his struggle not to surrender to his natural desires. We haven’t time to read the entire account at this time, but do note how the Apostle sets the scene. “My brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code” [**ROMANS 7:4-6**].

We once lived by a moral code that prohibited certain actions. The force of a law on the natural person is to make that person desire to try to see how close he can come to the boundary without actually crossing the boundary. Those of you who have children will recognise that this is the natural condition. Two children riding in the back seat begin to argue. One cries out, “Mom, she’s touching me!” You warn them to stop aggravating one another and continue driving. Shortly, you hear the inevitable cry, only this time from the other side of the vehicle, “Mom, he’s touching me!” You warn them and continue driving, and the scenario is repeated several times.

Finally, you stop the car, sternly warn the children there is a boundary between them and they are not to put a finger across an imaginary line drawn in the centre of the seat. You resume your drive, anticipating that all is resolved. Suddenly, you hear the inevitable, “Mom, his finger is on my side of the seat!” At this moment you are ready to send them both to grandma so you have some rest.

What is happening? They are displaying the human condition. Make a law and the natural inclination is to test the boundaries. When caught transgressing the law, complain bitterly that you didn’t cross the line. So throughout the remainder of this chapter Paul speaks of his struggle—a losing struggle we must note—against the natural desires as they run up against the law of God. He concludes in genuine anguish, “I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me” [**ROMANS 7:18-20**].

His final observation on what is happening is found in the final statements of the chapter. “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin” [**ROMANS 7:24, 25**].

The Christian's life means that the child of God is firmly situated in two worlds. Believers are restricted by the body to this material world with all the problems associated with our fallen condition. The great tragedy of this condition is that the old nature with its desires is not buried. We are dead with Christ, and thus spiritually alive; but we struggle against the desires—very natural desires—that still define our earthly lives. And those desires are now perverted and will remain so. For this reason, we must not surrender to those desires as though they mean nothing. At the same time we are God's new creation, destined to live eternally in the presence of God. That future is already a spiritual reality—we are now living in the presence of the True and Living God. In fact, God Himself lives in the Christian.

Shortly the Apostle will write, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

"You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

"So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" [ROMANS 8:1-14].

Note the dichotomy of life that Paul describes. We are free in Christ, but we must not surrender to the flesh. When we give in to the desires of the flesh we are revealing something dreadfully flawed in our lives. To allow yourself to think as the world thinks at the level of this momentary existence is to demonstrate that God does not factor into your life. Let me put that another way in order to emphasise what the Apostle is saying. When we justify doing what makes us feel good rather than doing what pleases the Father, we are effectively saying that we are at the centre of our lives. To act in that fashion is to declare brazenly that we deserve what we want when we want it. It is to assert callous disregard of the will of the Master.

As followers of the Master, we dare not practise lawlessness. We adhere to the law of the Spirit, seeking to do those things that honour Christ Jesus and that glorify the Father. We turn from pursuing our own desires and seek to do what the Spirit of God wills for us. We make every effort to be godly, to be holy, to be righteous. We are not trying to be plastic; we strive to be real. The Apostle discusses that very issue in one further portion of the Word that must now receive consideration since we are discussing ourselves as competitors. In one of his earliest letters to be included in the canon of Scripture, the Letter to Galatian churches, Paul has written, "You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

“If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit” [GALATIANS 5:13-25].

If Christ the Master rules over my life, if He reigns supreme in my heart, I will be controlled by His Spirit. Consequently, in ever greater measure the fruit of the Spirit will be revealed in our lives. That fruit is the evidence that the flesh is under control. We can gauge how effective the Spirit controls our life by assessing the presence of these graces—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

On the other hand, if my life is marked to any significant degree by such character traits as sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, addiction, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and things like that, it is mute though effective evidence that the flesh is prevailing. In that case, my status as a competitor is called into question. I do want to take just a moment to note the catchall phrase Paul used after the dark list of character traits that mark the lives of non-competitors. The Apostle wrote of “things like these.” Paul did not mean to present an exhaustive list of fleshly characteristics; rather, he was presenting a representative list.

Again, we are not competing against one another, though that is sometimes hard to believe when witnessing the actions of many professing Christians. Within a given congregation we too often witness jealousy and struggling to gain an advantage over fellow believers. Power brokers seem always to infect the assemblies as some dear saint believes her opinion is more important than that of another believer. Others, angered because they didn’t get their way, react with choler and drop out of the fellowship, rejecting the multiplied affirmations of devotion and love they have made previously. Still others will attempt to punish the congregation through withholding their love or refusing to participate in worship through giving. These responses are not occasional—they are frequent. At any given time in an assembly, any or all of these matters are occurring as professed saints of God surrender to the desires of their fallen nature. Fortunately, there are others—I believe to be the majority of worshippers—who endeavour to walk in the Spirit, expressing the fruits of the Spirit in increasing measure.

I must touch on one further aspect of our competition. Many Christians assume that adopting various practises will conquer the desires of the natural man. Some practise various forms of asceticism—fasting, recitation of prayers, participation in sundry church rites, reading devotional works; however, none of these practises, no matter how beneficial they might appear, can defeat the desires of the flesh. The Apostle addresses this matter when he writes, “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” [COLOSSIANS 2:20-23].

Here is the reality that must be recognised—we are dead to the world, and the world is dead to us! Our baptism declared that we were dead to sin. Therefore, as the Apostle states elsewhere, “You also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” [ROMANS 6:11].

The passage from the Letter to the Colossian Congregation that was just cited moves quite naturally to another similar plea when the Apostle writes, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” [COLOSSIANS 3:5-10].

We can take positive steps to crucify the old nature. First, *recognise the elements associated with this fallen nature* and refuse to permit them to have dominion over our lives. Then, *understand the danger in surrendering to the elements of this fallen world*—these character traits invite the wrath of God. And if He will judge the world because of these things, shall we be spared discipline if we embrace them? Of course He will discipline His child! Finally, *formally renounce these character traits identified with this broken, fallen world*. We cannot expect that we have sufficient ability in ourselves to be holy. However, as we practise the divine replacement therapy of seeking what pleases God and doing those things, His Spirit dwelling in us will equip us to fulfil His will.

COMPETING — Those competing in the Greek games were required to meet three qualifications. A competitor had to be a trueborn Greek. Again, he had to prepare for at least ten months before being allowed to compete in the games. In order to assure compliance with this requirement, the competitor was required to swear to that fact before a statue of Zeus. Finally, the competitor had to compete within the specific rules for a given event. Should a competitor fail any of these criteria, he was immediately disqualified.

Just as there were rules for competing in the Greek Games, there are rules for competing as a Christian. There is nothing mysterious or obscure about these rules. We must be born from above; we must show fidelity to God’s Word and will; and we must live according to the divine standard for those who are disciples of the Master as revealed in the Word.

To say that one is a Christian is to acknowledge that the individual is twice-born through faith in the Risen Son of God. Hence, each believer is truly qualified to compete for the crowns that are promised to faithful servants. Take a moment to recall what is promised. While we cannot say definitively what is meant by crowns that are promised, the fact that a gracious God has promised these crowns is sufficient to encourage the most jaded saint to lift his head in anticipation. It must assuredly mean something significant and wonderful that many saints will be thus honoured by the Lord God.

We read of the *crown of life* that is promised to the believer who is proven steadfast in trials. James writes, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him” [JAMES 1:12]. God acknowledges that His beloved disciple shall be tested—she will be tried. However, God is pledged to ensure that her testing does not go unnoticed or unrewarded. God has promised the crown of life to the individual who is steady in the face of trials. You, who face trials, take heart that God knows what you are going through, and He shall reward you.

This promise of the crown of life is emphasised for those who receive the devil's attention. When believers suffer satanic assault, God is pledged to ensure that they are rewarded. However, the believers must be faithful, even to the point of death. Jesus appoints John to write, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" [REVELATION 2:10].

Paul speaks of the Philippian believers as his "joy and crown" [see PHILIPPIANS 4:1]. In speaking thusly, he may be referring to yet another crown promised to soul winners—the *crown of boasting*. In his first letter to the saints in Thessalonica, Paul asks, "What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you" [1 THESSALONIANS 2:19]? Again, I cannot tell you precisely what is described by these words, I can only say that God, who is too good needlessly to injure His child and too wise to make a mistake, takes note of those among the saints who labour to turn others to righteousness.

There is a crown promised to those who are faithful in the ministries to which God has appointed—the *crown of glory*. Peter directed his words to faithful elders. "I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" [1 PETER 5:1-4].

That is a wonderful encouragement for elders. However, I want you to note the following verse. "Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another" [1 PETER 5:5a]. Note the language. "Likewise" implies that what has already been said applies equally to those now addressed. Also, as Peter urges "all of you" to clothe yourselves with humility," it is obvious that he now includes the entire Body. There is promised, then, divine recognition for faithful fulfilment of the ministry to which God has assigned each Christian.

Finally, I note there is promised a *crown of righteousness* for those who have lived in anticipation of the Lord's return. As he writes the closing words of this second letter to Timothy, the aged Apostle encourages us with this promise, "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing" [2 TIMOTHY 4:8].

Those who are born from above, and only those who are twice-born, may anticipate that God takes note of their fidelity and service, giving appropriate rewards for their faithful service. Thinking of the promised rewards, it is essential to note that those who will be rewarded are responsible to adhere to God's Word and will. If they pursue their own desires, they sacrifice the right to divine recognition before the assembled saints and angels. Divine acknowledgement or divine denial is more definite than we might imagine. Jesus said, "I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God" [LUKE 12:8, 9].

Our Master rightly anticipates that His people know His will. To know His will requires that we know what He has stated in His Word. It is a wonderful thing to attend the services of a Bible-preaching church, knowing that the Pastor faithfully declares the Word of God. However, if you will be spiritually nourished, you must feed on the Word on a continual basis. As a Christian, I am responsible to spend time in the presence of the Lord Christ hearing Him through His Word and speaking with Him in prayer.

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I provided three stipulations for successfully competing against the flesh—the one competing must be born from above; the one competing must show fidelity to God’s Word and will; and the one competing must live according to the divine standard. Serious athletes are always in training. Successful athletes understand that they haven’t the luxury of taking time away from disciplining the body to respond to the various pleasures of life. Whether we speak of a hockey player, a football player, whether thinking of riflery or of a triathlon competitor, the requirement is constant discipline to ensure that the individual competes effectively. Consequently, it is not always the one who is the most polished that wins. There is an undefined aspect of competition that speaks of “heart.” The true competitor that will compete at the level of a champion is talented, but the winner may not necessarily be the most talented. The true winner will, however, have the greatest determination and the most persistence.

Christians are running a marathon, not a sprint. Too often we evangelicals give the appearance that we think the Christian life is a short-term issue—we are saved, and that is it! Nothing could be farther from the truth. We are striving to mature. We are constantly struggling against the desires of our fallen nature as we grow toward maturity. The need to be alert and to struggle against the flesh will continue until Christ returns.

Looking at the congregations in the Meander Valley, Paul wrote of this continuing challenge when he wrote: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it says,

‘When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.’

(In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” [EPHESIANS 4:1-15].

WINNING — Though it appears at first to be dark, the Apostle makes a most encouraging statement as he draws this missive to a conclusion. The incarcerated saint has written, “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” [2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8].

The Apostle anticipated winning. Undoubtedly Christians rejoice in the Apostle's success in running his course. However, take careful note of the final affirmation he appends. Yes, Paul was certain that he would stay the course, that he would win the Crown of Righteousness! But for us, the most encouraging statement comes when he testifies that each believer can win that same Crown of Righteousness. We saw earlier that among the various rewards that are available to be won is the Crown of Righteousness, which the Apostle anticipates receiving in this victorious affirmation. Here is the point of his statement: the Crown of Righteousness will be awarded by the hand of our gracious Saviour; this crown is reserved for "all who have loved his appearing." This means that no Christian should feel excluded. Your struggle to excel has not been a loss—the race will have proved successful so long as you keep your eye on the goal. The fact that you have not quit, that you continued pushing yourself to win, will result in praise and honour to the Lord; and He Himself shall reward you.

Perhaps you will recall the encouragement penned by an unknown author about the same time Paul was writing. The passage is found in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews. Verses one and two read, "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" [HEBREWS 12:1, 2].

Writing the Church of God at Corinth Paul pointedly describes the competition to which each Christian is appointed. The Apostle writes, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" [1 CORINTHIANS 9:24-27].

This passage brings us back to the passage cited earlier from the final chapter of this Letter to Timothy. We keep our eyes focused on the Founder and Perfecter of our faith and we practise self-discipline in order to avoid disqualification for the prize. Our concern is not that we may somehow be disowned and lost; our concern is that we succeed in the race we are running. And why are we so concerned to succeed if glory and honour belong to the Lord in any case?

There is a beautiful scene described in the Apocalypse. After John witnessed an unseen hand drawing back the curtain that hides the eternal from the eyes of the mortal, he describes the scene before him. "After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads" [REVELATION 4:1-4].

Around the eternal throne of God are the faithful who are translated into Heaven itself. They are clothed in white garments—white garments given by God Himself [REVELATION 3:5, 18]. John describes these white garments as "fine linen, bright and clean." He then informs us that "fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints" [REVELATION 19:8]. Even now, as we glorify the Master and honour the True and Living God, white garments are being prepared for us, fine linen that is to be given by the True and Living God. As we live holy lives to the praise of Christ' glory, these beautiful white garments are being prepared for us to wear.

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John continues describing the scene in heaven, and we will benefit from looking at what he saw. “From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

“And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!’

[REVELATION 4:5-8]

Notice the response of the saints gathered before the rainbow throne. “Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

‘Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.’”

[REVELATION 4:9-11]

We shall cast our crowns before Him. We persevered. We stayed the course. We finished the race. But the Master is the hero of the story! We confess that He did it all for us. Whatever strength we possessed, He gave it to us. Whatever courage we demonstrated He infused into our lives. Whatever we may have accomplished, it was through Him.

The Apostle reveals an encouraging aspect of Christ’s return when he writes the saints in Thessalonica. These saints were under severe pressure—they were experiencing unrelenting persecution from those about them. They were being especially persecuted by the religious people of the city. Paul is encouraging these saints not to lose heart, but to look forward to that day when Christ Jesus returns. He shall not come as “the gentle Jesus, meek and mild”: He comes to judge the wicked. So, Paul writes, “God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” Take special note of the purpose of Christ’s return in the verse that follows. Our Lord “comes on that day to be glorified in his saints and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed” [2 THESSALONIANS 1:6-10].

Christ is coming again; and we shall win this competition if we do not lose heart and if we keep our eye on the goal. God will reward those who have continued faithful, trusting themselves to the care of the righteous God. None can be considered “super saints”; all are equally loved and equally prepared for this race.

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But what of outsiders? You who listen who have never put faith in the Risen Son of God, what of you? What of the one who is religious, but in all the religious devotions in which she participates she has never known the Lord of Glory? How shall she fare? What shall be done with the one who was too busy with the affairs of this life even to think of the Son of God? What will become of such people?

Christ is coming to judge, and either our judgement has already taken place at the Cross, or we shall stand in that great assize when the wicked shall be turned away into eternal darkness. Yet, it need not be thus, for God now offers freedom from condemnation, adoption into His Family and life in His Beloved Son. This is the promise of God. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10**]. That promise from God concludes with another promise first penned long years past by the Prophet Joel, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:13**].

Our invitation to you who are outside the precincts of grace this day is to come believing that Jesus died because of your sin and that He has been raised from the dead to declare you righteous before the Faith. Even as you listen, you need but call on the Name of the Lord. “Here, Lord, I surrender my life to you. Even now, Master, I confess my sinful condition and ask that you set aside all my sin. Receive me into your love and deliver me from condemnation. Amen.”