

T. Austin-Sparks:

"Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:3).

"Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? Even so run, that ye may attain" (1 Corinthians 9:24).

"Ye were running well; who did hinder you ...?" (Galatians 5:7).

"LET us run". It is not so much the running or the race that is in view but the goal, the prize. What is the objective of our running? Ideas about this vary greatly, and much evangelism limits it to the fact of being forgiven and going to heaven. When, however, we come to the New Testament, which is our final authority on the matter, we find that although blessings and heaven and glory are included, the real objective is a Person. The prize turns out to be a person, and that person, the Lord Jesus Christ. At this point in the letter to the Hebrews we are faced with a summing up and an exhortation, but it is clear that we must go back to the beginning of this marvellous document if we are to appreciate the force of its appeal.

The beginning of this epistle gives us one of the two or three classical presentations of the person of the Lord Jesus. I feel sure that if Paul did not actually write it, the writer was one of Paul's school, notably so in his apprehension of the matchless greatness of Christ. The first five verses provide us with a superlatively beautiful presentation of God's Son. It is to this Son -- Jesus -- that we are to look as we run. He is the goal: He is the prize. The letter has as its supreme object the setting forth of Divine fullness and finality in God's Son, presented to faith for faith's apprehension and appropriation. Fullness in Christ -- the gathering up of all into Him. Finality in Christ -- the completion and realisation of all in Him. It goes on to consider in greater detail what He is and what He has done, His manifold capacity and ministry as God's Son, turning then to an exhortation that we should keep this well in view and pursue our race with fullness and finality in Christ as our objective. Our lifetime will not be sufficient for us to attain to this: eternity will be required for us to discover what fullness really is.

If the goal and prize is Christ then the race will resolve itself into overcoming everything that is not Christ. The Christian life is a course, and a very strenuous course, calling for our utmost concentration, consecration and abandon. After all, progress can never be made unless there is something to work against, and strange as it may seem, friction seems almost essential to progress. One cannot run on ice, and one can only make slow and unsatisfactory progress on deep sand. There must be something against which one can press and push, something that provides resistance and which has to be resisted and overcome. So our race is a matter of overcoming, and supremely of overcoming the natural by the spiritual. Our three texts will give us three areas in which such an overcoming is called for in the Christian life. We find three contrasts.

(1) Natural Intellect or the Mind of the Spirit.

We begin with Paul's allusion to the Christian race in his letter to the Corinthians. He told them to run and later added: "So I run" (1 Corinthians 9:26). We do not have to look far to discover what you had to run against if you lived among those Corinthians. The letter begins with the complete contrast between the spiritual man and the natural man, showing that in this race the spiritual man [81/82] has to run against the natural, and defeat him. We must be careful to note that it is not a question of overcoming the natural man by the natural man -- that is a hopeless endeavour. No, the spiritual man is the new creation man, born of the Spirit and now the deepest inner reality of the Christian. The fact is that within the sphere of a Christian's being there is the natural man, who always hinders God's purposes, and the 'hidden man of the heart' who is governed by the mind of the Spirit. And the attaining of the prize is the result of the progress and growth of what is of Christ in the life and the leaving behind, often by conflict, of that which is not Christ.

Most of this letter is an exhibition of how the natural mind behaves in the things of God. Christian fellowship, even the Lord's Table and many other important features of the spiritual life were confused and muddled because the Corinthians were being governed by their own natural way of thinking. Our natural mind is a great obstacle in the race which we are running, cropping up all the time with its complexes, its arguments, its interests and its methods. When the Corinthians were brought into the Church they left behind their obvious sins but they carried over into their new realm the old, natural ways of thinking and reasoning which belonged to the world and not to the Spirit of God. But the apostle remonstrated with them: "But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16), so urging them to allow the cross to be planted between the natural mind and the

spiritual. We shall only come to the fullness of Christ as we leave behind the mind of the natural man and move on more and more in the progress of the mind of Christ. On everything; every judgment, every conclusion, every analysis, every appraisal; we must ask the Lord: 'Is that Your mind, Lord, or is it mine? We may sometimes feel that we have the strongest ground for taking up a certain attitude or coming to a certain conclusion; we may feel that we have all the evidence and so are convinced; and yet we may be wrong.

The man who wrote the letter to the Corinthians knew from deep and bitter experience that this was the case. "I verily thought ... that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" he said (Acts 26:9). There was no man who had stronger convictions as to the rightness of his course than Saul of Tarsus. The great revolution which took place in him when he came to Christ was that he had to say: 'I have been all wrong in my fundamental way of thinking'. After that confession he made good headway in the race because he was always ready to subject his thinking to the jurisdiction of his crucified Lord. This is the way of spiritual progress. We shall not get very far while we hold to our own opinions and our own conclusions, even though we may have the support of others; we have to learn to conquer our natural mind by submission to the mind of Christ. This is most important if we are concerned about spiritual progress. And spiritual progress is the increase of Christ -- there is no other.

(2) Natural Emotions or the Love of Christ.

Paul wrote to the Galatians: "Ye were running well: what did hinder ...?" Something had broken in and interrupted their running in the spiritual race. This was extremely serious and disturbed Paul to the depths of his being. It seems that in the case of the Galatians it was again the natural man, but this time in the realm of natural emotions. They seem to have been of that temperamental constitution which corresponds to Christ's words in the parable about seed falling into shallow soil. The seed was received quickly and earnestly, but did not go on to produce a harvest. There are some people who make an enthusiastic start in this way and make quite a stir about it, but then do not go steadily on. These Galatians were like that; they made a tremendous response; they loudly protested their devotion; and then they were very quick to drop out of the race. Why? Because they lived on their emotions, on their feelings, and these were changeable. This may well be a matter of temperament, but in fact something of such a characteristic can be found in most of us. We respond to an appeal, come under the power of a great emotion, and then slack off. In the words of the Lord Jesus: "When tribulation or persecution ariseth ... he is offended" (Matthew 13:21).

Clearly, then, if you and I are going to persevere to the end we must have a greater power than that of our natural emotional life. The only hope is [82/83] that it may be true of us, as of Paul: "The love of Christ constraineth" (2 Corinthians 5:14). There is all the difference between the natural and the spiritual in this matter of the energy of love. This word translated 'constraineth' is the same one used over the arrest of Jesus when it says: "the men that held Jesus" (Luke 22:63). They took a purchase on Him; they were not going to let Him escape; He was a prize, and they expected a reward for arresting Him. So it is that the love of Christ should hold or grip us, conquering our natural emotions by the mighty power of the Spirit. Our feelings come and go. They may be strong at times but they can also grow very weak. If we do not know something of the mighty grip of Christ's love, we will never go right through to the end of this strenuous race. After all it is the love of Christ which makes for the fullness of Christ. If we finally come to that fullness it can only be by the constraint and holding power of His love. "Ye were running well: who did hinder you?" The answer is, You ran in the strength of your own emotions, you ran as your enthusiastic response to God's call because it affected your feelings for the time. The letter to the Galatians is devoted to emphasising the place of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, for He alone can supply the necessary energy of love for us to go on running well.

(3) The Natural Will or the Will of God.

Our third text is taken from the letter to the Hebrews and is in the form of an exhortation: "Let us run ...". A comparison is made with Israel in the wilderness, as being an example of those who set out but who never finished the race. What was the matter with them? There is a reference which perhaps touches the secret core of their failure: "A generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not steadfast with God" (Psalm 78:8). This seems to indicate a breakdown in the matter of the will. It is true that the Hebrews to whom the letter was addressed may have been stumbled by the natural mind and natural emotions, but the main point of failure seems to have been -- like Israel of old -- in the realm of the will. Whether this natural will is regarded as weak or strong, it has a treacherous effect on spiritual life. There can only be real progress as this natural will is set aside in favour of the will of God. It was on this basis that the great Author of our faith set out on His race: "I am come ... to do thy will. O God" (Hebrews 10:7). What a battle He had to remain true to the will of God! Even with Him there was that which had to be brought under or set aside, and His was a perfect nature. Our natures are far from perfect, so clearly we shall need to be conquered by the will of God if we are to make

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progress in the race.

We should remember that the opportunity to know this all-embracing fullness of Christ only comes to us because of His infinite capacity for letting go. But for that He would never have come to us at all. But for that He would never have put up with life here on earth for one single day. The story of the laying aside of His glory, the emptying of Himself, His humiliation, His death on the cross, would never have been written if it had not been that He was able at all points to let go and accept the will of God. "Wherefore ... God highly exalted him, and gave unto him ..." (Philippians 2:9). God gives when we let go.