

**YOU WILL RECEIVE THE VICTOR'S IMPERISHABLE CROWN**

Hear the Word of God for this seventieth day before the Feast of the

Resurrection of our Lord :

*For I do not will all of you to be ignorant, O brothers, because our fathers were under the cloud and all went through the sea and all in Moses were baptized in the cloud and in the sea and all the same spiritual food ate and all the same spiritual drink drank; for they drank of the continually following spiritual Rock, and the Rock was the Christ.<sup>1</sup>*

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

In congregations which follow the helpful tradition of hearing the more ancient reading series in the Church, we have entered the time of pre-Lent. Our Church Year now prepares us for the fasts of Lent – our abstaining from Gloria Hymns and Alleluia verses – and any fasting you may privately choose to practice, not to earn favor from God, but to remind us of the price He paid to buy us back from our sins. This Sunday focuses our thoughts on God's Word and believers' responses to it. From the grumbling against God and His called servant by the people whom He had miraculously saved from worldly slavery, to the complaining of the fairly paid workers in the vineyard, God's grace and man's ungratefulness have been declared. This is done to call us to examine our responses to God's gifts, to turn us from joyless demands for more, now, to joyful reception of God's mercy, salvation, and life which cost us nothing, and God everything.

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<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians 10:1-4.

To that end, the mood of the Lord's services begins today to subtly shift our thinking toward the quiet joy of the time of contemplation and repentance that is coming in Lent. Readings and hymns move us to greater reflection on God's faith and human responses. Today, the Word of God through St. Paul is declared into our ears. It is part of the beginning of God's preparing us for the coming of Lent. We hear in them an annual remembrance of believers' responses to Jesus' suffering, passion and death to bring us God's forgiveness for all our sins:

*Do not all of you know the ones running in the stadium all run, but one receives the prize? Thus, all of you run that you all attain it.<sup>2</sup>*

So commences the Apostle's call to daily contrition and repentance for the faithful, we who confess Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of all their sins. Of all the texts that an enthusiast pastor, one who does not follow a liturgical calendar, could select for Super Bowl Sunday, this one seems very fitting. (Yet, when it was chosen for this annually repeated Sunday of the Church Year, there were no Super Bowls, no football games, and no United States of America). What you are about to hear is that you are all Giants and Patriots in the Faith of Christ. There are several ties between the spectacle which is coming later today and that of 1,960 years ago. Both would be held in stadiums with capacities of tens of thousands. Both would be in cities once built on major water trade routes. Both would capture the attention of the "civilized world;" provide escape for a time from life's daily concerns; and enable men to compete at their best for victors' trophies.

After two thousand years, few, if any, people know the names of the winners of those ancient games in Corinth. The prizes of the ancient victors of the Isthmia games -- most likely garlands woven of wilted celery -- have all turned to ashes. The names of today's conquering team members will be little remembered by any 1,960 years from now. The prize of today's victors is unlikely to be around in two thousand years.

Yet, the Word of the Lord which was sown among some of those who likely attended the ancient world's equivalent of the Super Bowl has grown and flourished. Some who witness today's spectacle will be one in the Faith (not the faith of the arena, but the Faith of the Man who was hung into death as a public spectacle) with those who long ago died in Christ. The Word of the Lord being sown in congregations like this one today, in which sit many who will witness today's contest, will still be true and living 2,000 years from now! St. Paul proclaims:

*Do not all of you know the ones running in the stadium all run, but one receives the prize? Thus, all of you run that you all attain it. For each one who engages in (an) athletic contest, all of them continue to exercise self-control; these certainly (do so) that they might receive (a) perishable crown, but we (an) imperishable.*<sup>3</sup>

A man, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, composed the words you are hearing today a year or so after the Isthmus Games, which were second in the ancient world only to the Olympics. Those games, held in the year we date AD 51 as they had been every other year for centuries, took place in the stadium outside of Corinth. That structure held an event field twice as long and almost half as wide as a football field.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:24.

There, before crowds that certainly could have held one Paul of Tarsus, people watched athletes compete in major athletic events: foot races, jumping, boxing, the javelin toss, and discus throwing. So, in writing to a congregation which he knew, whose Isthmia games would be still fresh in their memories, Paul used references which would be familiar to the Corinthian Christians. He did so to help them understand how their new lives in Christ are lived out under God's Law and His Gospel. St. Paul's words for today, God's Word, follow on his restating the tenants of his Divine Call to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They are a call for believers to turn from specific sins – lust after evil things such as idolatry, sexual immorality, tempting Christ, complaining against God and His called servants. Paul's words were written to a Church established in a city which was known for its immorality (for example, for a woman to be called a "Corinthian girl" was to slur her reputation, to declare that she held no moral standards in mind or body). Yet Paul's words apply to all Churches established in the midst of the world's temptations, even to us here today.

With the Faith, temptations to fall away, to turn from God's Word, His gifts, His spectacle, come daily. Why, according to at least one survey, many people will be watching today's game to be tempted to lust after new products. (According to one report, a large percentage of the estimated 9 million viewers today would prefer to mute the game and watch the commercials). Yes, commercials are temptations – not necessarily to evil – but temptations to part with your money to gain things you are told

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<sup>3</sup> *1 Corinthians 9:24-25.*

you “can’t live without.” Their mere existence, and success among us, shows us that people of our age still like to be enticed into things – for good or, for evil.

So, we do have a relationship with the ancient faithful, and that not just in our new natures, but in our Old Adam who still clings to us. It is against that sinful nature that God calls us to turn from, through St. Paul’s words, and the examples of the complaining Israelites and vineyard workers. Three times you have heard today Paul admonish you to self-control, to discipline, to attaining the imperishable crown. Does that mean that he is calling you to actually do something to win your salvation?

Perish the thought! God through St. Paul actually declares that salvation has been won for you. Yet, though your victory against sin, death, and hell itself is accomplished – through the death of Jesus in your sins – daily battles still occur for you. The devil, the world, and yes, your own sinful flesh, still bear down on you, tempting you, testing you to see if you will turn back to your defeated enemies and reject the prize which God has given to you. Oh, that free will, that ability to choose between good and evil that only the baptized believing Christian has in fullness! What are you to do? For some, life’s race in the Faith has been long, almost ninety years or more. Daily you are beset with much temptation – to deny God’s presence, to turn from His gifts, and to return to walk again fully in the ways of the world.

St. Paul’s own confession, that he beats himself under the eye, to subdue his body from temptations lest he fall back into unrepentant sinfulness, stands as your example. He uses his own self-discipline in the Word of God which turns him from his

sinful desires and to the gifts which God has given. You have heard him declare that he clings to God's promises that he not be, at the end of his mortal life, disqualified from the inheritance Jesus died to give him. Now, hear the means Paul declares are given to keep him, and you, and all believers in the Faith until life's race is run:

*For I do not will all of you to be ignorant, O brothers, because our fathers were under the cloud and all went through the sea and all in Moses were baptized in the cloud and in the sea and all the same spiritual food ate and all the same spiritual drink drank; for they drank of the continually following spiritual Rock, and the Rock was the Christ.<sup>4</sup>*

One little word marks out the beginning of that confession of the Faith. Many modern translations, including the one in our bulletins, leave it out. The word which may be translated, "for," or "then," or "so," is used by the Apostle to connect his illustrations about maintaining discipline in the Faith to the words which you just heard translated. It is used to declare how one might keep the Old Nature down, and let the New Nature rise to live before God daily. One word means that you may take that which follows, and discover in it the means which God provides to keep you in the Faith.

Writing to those who were even then in the Faith, St. Paul declares that *our fathers* that is, that the Israelites, those whom God had rescued from bondage, are the forefathers of all who are in the Faith. God had, as St. Paul declares, *in Moses*, baptized the ancients whom He rescued. God had given them spiritual food and drink. He had given them the pre-incarnate Christ - the Rock Whose side Moses was commanded to the first time, and the second time commanded not to, strike that living water might flow.

God had given the people whom He delivered types of the means of His grace, deliverance through the waters, and spiritual food and drink. He, through His prophets and shepherds continually called them to return to those shadows of His coming New Testament means of grace. As God's Word declares, most of them, in fact all of that generation except two - Joshua and Caleb - perished without entering the Promised Land. The Word of God makes it clear that was due to their unfaithfulness, falling into temptation, sexual immorality, tempting Christ, complaining against God and His called messengers. God had led them day and night with the shining cloud of His glory, they saw the majesty of His Presence, and fell away because they did not avail themselves of His means of grace.

God is calling you today regularly return to the anti-types of the cloud and sea, the heavenly food, and spiritual drink. When you are tempted to sin, when you fall into temptation, God wants you to return first to the washing He gave you with the Water and the Word. Find there your death to sin, in Christ, and your rising to new life, in Him. Look to the heavenly food prepared for you by the Lord, at His Table, taste and see that the Lord has here prepared forgiveness and eternal life strengthening to you. See the image of the Christ hanging here, side pierced, from which once flowed down water and blood for your salvation. In Christ, in His gifts, prefigured in the deliverance of the Israelites, in the gifts of food and drink they received, God gives you that which

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<sup>4</sup> *1 Corinthians 10:1-4.*

you need to run life's race in the Faith. In Christ, in the end, you will receive the Victor's imperishable crown.

**The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

Septuagesima (LSB One-year series)

Exodus 17:1-17; I Corinthians 9:24-10:5; Matthew 20:1-16

February 5, 2012

*Pastor Michael H. Morehouse*

**SOLI DEO GLORIA**

*For the one continually engaging in (an) athletic contest continues to exercise self-control in all things, in order that they might receive (a) perishable crown: but we (do so) for (an) imperishable (one).<sup>5</sup>*

*for they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them; and the Rock was Christ.<sup>6</sup>*

*For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways."<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> I Corinthians 9:25.

<sup>6</sup> I Corinthians 10:4.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 95:10.