

Words Of Welcome

(The words of welcome were given by T. A. Smith, one of the elders of the Bellingham Class. Dated Oct. 14, 1979.)

I have the honor and privilege and pleasure to welcome you to our all-day gathering for 1979. Our first gathering was in the year 1958, so this year is the 22nd time that we have come together to enjoy the Lord's blessings. I was noticing some of the names that were on our first programs: Bro. Price, Bro. Canell, Bro. Wilcox, Bro. Bolton, Bro. Chambers, Bro. Burdett, Bro. Kirkham, Bro. Trickett, Bro. McNee. Two brethren have finished their course—Bro. Price and Bro. Wilcox, but the rest of us are still here, still on the racecourse; and there are a few new brethren who are now on the racecourse with us. We think of Bro. Don Nussel and the sons of Bro. and Sis. Kirkham, for example, and there are others too, that we have not named.

Speaking of being on the Christian racecourse, reminds us of Paul's epistle to the Philippians (3:13, 14). I shall read these verses: "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

There are three main words in the 14th verse that are worthy of careful consideration: press, mark and prize. The word "press" is translated in a number of ways, and it is interesting to note that it is translated a number of times by the word "persecute." This seems odd at first, but thinking of the spirit that actuated those who persecuted, the thought seems to be that of strong pressure, a pursuit with great energy. We remember how Paul was pursued and persecuted on his missionary journeys by his countrymen, the Jews. He was opposed from city to city and even the same persons followed him to antagonize him and stop his work. So if we apply this to the spirit we should have in connection with our running on the Christian racecourse, it means that we are pursuing a certain course with great energy. We think the word "relentless" would be appropriate.

The second word, "mark" is found only once in the New Testament. It has in it a very important thought for us to never lose sight of, and that is there is something we must attain in the way of character, else we shall never win or reach the prize. In fact we are justified in saying that if we do not have respect for the mark, even more than the prize, we shall never be rewarded with the prize. It is like someone might say to us, or offer to us a wonderful position in life, but he would emphasize the thought that we must make careful preparation that we might be fitted for this position. The position itself would be very enjoyable, but unless we made the proper preparation we would not fit into that position, we would be out of place, so to speak.

The third word is “prize”. It is used only twice in the New Testament. Once in our text and once in 1 Cor. 9:24. Paul says in 1 Cor. 9:24, “Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain.” The verses following are very interesting and significant: “And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.”

So, dear brethren, our fellowship together in Christ, includes the wonderful thought that we are running with great energy, great purpose in a racecourse, and we understand that we must be intent upon reaching a certain mark, if we are to be rewarded with the prize at the end of the racecourse. We take particular notice of the thought that the prize is to those who reach the mark. It is reach the mark first, THEN the prize.

Would we say that our Lord was running for a prize? Yes, I think we are safe in saying this. Let us consider Heb. 12:2: “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith. In the margin we notice that the word author can be thought of as “beginner.” So the Lord is the beginner and finisher of our faith. He is our Redeemer and our Advocate. Only as we are in Him do we have any standing with God at all. We accept redemption from condemnation to death, and this redemption cost him his human life on the cruel cross. He is our Head and our Leader, our Master, our Teacher. He has led the way and we are to walk in his footsteps.

As for the mark I think we have something that we can easily understand. I have in mind the words of Peter (2 Pet. 1:2 to 13): “Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, according as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue; whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. And besides this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure; for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting

kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” And now we notice the 12th and 13th verses: “Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth. Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance.”

What is Peter telling us in these verses? He says even though we know these things, and even are established in present truth, he thought it necessary and essential to our spiritual and eternal welfare to be put in remembrance of these essential qualities of the mark, if we are ever to win the prize at the end of the racecourse.

As I study the Truth over the years and get more experience under the Lord’s guidance I am impressed with the great importance of our giving heed to the standard of character put before us. Sound doctrine is very important, but if we do not develop the Christ-Spirit, the prize will be denied us at the end of our course in life.

Peter’s earnest and forceful words of exhortation reminds us of his words in his first epistle (1:22): “Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently.” Yes, Peter was loving fervently when he was constantly reminding the Lord’s people to be spiritually alert as to the importance of character development—the development of the various graces of the spirit. We looked up this word “fervently” in the dictionary and it means “great warmth and earnestness of feeling.” And this was Peter’s attitude. He was warm and earnest toward the brethren, wishing them to pay attention to their character development.

We can be sure Paul had the same fervent, warm love for the Lord’s people when he called for the elders of Ephesus to meet him when he was on his way to Jerusalem at the conclusion of a trip that he had taken in behalf of the brethren. His very earnest message to the elders of Ephesus is found in Acts 20, starting with verse 27: “For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.” The thought we gather from Paul’s words is that if the elders feed the church of God, then they are in no danger from “grievous wolves” or from the efforts of men who “speak perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.”

I am sure we are all keenly aware of the fact that if we are to be counted worthy to receive the prize of the high calling, we must be thoroughly tested and trained. This is clearly the case with the Head of the New Creation. As the Apostle states the matter in Heb. 5:8, “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he

suffered.” Yes, this outstanding Son of God, the firstborn of every creature, learned obedience by the things he suffered. This word suffered has a special meaning to us as we use it in ordinary English conversation—we usually think of this as meaning physical or mental distress of some kind. I looked up the meaning of this word in Strong’s concordance, and it has the meaning “to experience a sensation or impression (usually painful).” So it means to have experiences that are difficult. Peter tells us in 1 Pet. 5:10: “But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered awhile, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.” Our training is to perfect us in character, to stablish, strengthen and settle us—to crystallize us in Christ-likeness. This of course, has to do with the spirit we have, for we keenly realize that we are imperfect and cannot live perfectly up to the standard of perfection. We are acceptable in God’s sight because we are in Christ and have on his robe of righteousness to cover our weaknesses and unintentional imperfections.

We are all aware of the fragmentation of the Bible Student world. We want to have the right spirit and have the Lord’s approval. How do we protect ourselves? What means has the Lord provided to enable us to understand His will and to keep balanced and be a blessing to one another? Should we attempt to survey the Bible Student world and try to identify those, spoken of by Paul as speaking perverse things, to draw disciples after them, and then decide that we will not follow them? I think a better plan would be to carefully study the truth we have in our possession and endeavor to catch the spirit of this truth and follow it carefully in our personal lives and in our association with one another in our meetings and conventions. Our Pastor in his personal life and in his writings set us a wonderful example that we do well to ponder carefully daily. And while we are not to neglect the study of the Volumes, we should make a special effort to study the Reprint articles. The Pastor made a special effort to minister to us in the Tower articles.