Maurice Johnson picked up the piece of folded paper that Cherry Hill slid carefully across his desk in Science class and very quietly he opened it, on top of his opened Science book.

He knew Cherry maybe should not have passed a note to him during class and he thought that perhaps he should wait until class was dismissed.
to read what she had written, but he just couldn't wait. Not since it was from Cherry, that is. And not since it was just at the opening of class.

He unfolded the note and read what was written, studying the neat handwriting, as he had so often done when Cherry passed him a note or wrote him anything. Without a doubt, she must have been the best of all whom he knew in penmanship. Every letter was picture-perfect. That is, all the g's, j's, p's, or whatever, were identical in length below the center of the words and all l's, t's, b's, et cetera were identical above. Cherry should have a medal for excellent penmanship, he decided, smiling and wishing that would be considered noteworthy enough to merit an award from Cloverdale High, where he and Cherry were seniors.

Dear Maurice, the note began.

I heard by way of the grapevine that Nicholas Barrey and Mandie Bradshaw each say they have taken first place in that essay contest. Now I know that news, any news, via "grapevine" report should be taken with the proverbial "grain of salt" since, many times, "grapevine" news is nothing short of pure gossip. And, of course, we both know that God hates and condemns gossip. But, be that as it may, Mandie's been going around school holding her head up high-high, saying she knows she was the first place winner. And Nick, of course, refuted her claim, stating he was the first place winner.

Well, we'll soon know who it was, God willing. I'm hoping it's you. But if not, don't let it become a discouraging factor in your life. Not all achievements are decided by first place winners, you know. To many of us -- I mean, all of us! -- who know you, you will always be a first place winner. Your life radiates the truly important One -- Christ! This means far more to those of us who know you than taking, or earning, a medal for having won first place in writing the best essay on "Why I Believe in Democracy."

I realize you worked hard on that essay and you also put in many long hours researching, studying, collating, and what have you. And, should you not receive the highest honor -- first place, medal -- nor, even, second place, you will always know that you have benefited by having attempted, Maurice. All too many of our counterparts/peers fail, even, to attempt a thing, as you well know.
Next, let me state also that, always, you will have stored in your memory knowledge gained by what you have read, studied, and researched. This will be invaluable to you in the years to come: it cannot be taken away from you. Medal or no medal, first place, second place, or no mention at all, you will have been a winner. A real winner. Time spent in knowledge gained is, in itself, a winner. So you see, whatever happens, whoever wins or loses, you will still be a winner: a first place winner in my book of beautiful memories of a great young man; a very noble young man whose motto has always been, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Thanks, Maurice, for being such a perfect example of a truly Spirit-filled Christian. To those of us who know you, you are a first place, first rate Christian. God bless you! Cherry.

He folded the note carefully and tucked it for safekeeping inside his shirt breast pocket as he looked across at Cherry's bent-over-the-book head and whispered a soft, "Thank you" then he set his mind down to the lesson just as Mr. Fritz said, "Let's begin our lesson, please."

The day progressed as usual; a very good day, Maurice thought, as he heard the buzzer sound for the noon hour.

He found Cherry and several other Christian friends waiting in line for him inside the cafeteria door.

"We thought we'd lend you a bit of moral support;' Josh Meeks told him with a broad smile "I hear a couple of the essay writers are already bragging about having won. That's what I call counting one's chicks before they have hatched."

"Whew!" Andrew Koffer exclaimed. "Can you imagine the chagrin and the . . . the let-down if they're wrong! And it's as plain as the nose on one's face that one of those who is bragging and making the claim has positively and very definitely not won; there's only one first-place winner. And a second place, of course."

"Imagine the humiliation of the losing braggart!" Arletta Clye remarked. "I feel sorry for whichever one it will be. Jesus wants us to be compassionate" she added, "even though the pride behind it is quite sickening and obnoxious."
"You're right, Arletta" Cherry and Breanna Garfield stated in unison.

"And I think we should pray for them" Cherry added. "You know as well as I that some of the students are really going to make it hard on the loser. They can be so cruel and brutal at times."

"This is when and where we'll shine for Jesus" Maurice said. "One can do so much more with a hurting and a crushed individual, usually"

The following morning in an assembly meeting for students and faculty, Mr. Whittmer, the school superintendent, made the special announcement: "We are delighted and happy" he said, "to present a medal of great distinction and honor to this year's winner for writing the best essay on 'Why I Believe in Democracy.' I feel I am speaking for the entire faculty when I say that we had many excellent essays turned in this year. Much hard work and long hours of preparation were represented in these unusually fine papers. It was no easy job to make a final decision. We finally narrowed the essays down to three and, after much debate and again going over each one carefully, the winner was decided. Nicholas Barrey, Congratulations! You receive the medal as our first place winner."

Thunderous applause exploded in the enormous auditorium as Nicholas went forward to receive the medal; boys whistled, girls screamed. It took a long time for quiet to be restored.

"And now I am happy to announce our second place winner; Maurice Johnson! Right behind him is Mandie Bradshaw. Congratulations!" Mr. Whittmer exclaimed happily. "And congratulations to each one who turned in such excellent papers, but were not among the winners."

There was another round of loud applause and shortly afterward the students filed out of the auditorium for their classes.

Maurice found Nicholas at noon surrounded by many students who were congratulating him. Waiting his turn, he said, "Congratulations, Nicholas! I'm proud of you. I know you must have worked really hard on your essay. I'm happy as I can be for you."
Nicholas stared at Maurice for a moment. Then he said, "Hey, you mean that; I can feel it! Thanks. You're great yourself, Maurice. Any fellow who can congratulate the winner with true sincerity and honesty, like you've just done, and with no jealousy or envy, well, that's top-shelf something or other."

"It's Christ living in my heart, Nicholas." "Whatever it is, it's surely wonderful, Maurice. Mandie's so mad she won't speak to me. She told someone it wasn't fair that she didn't get first place In fact, she told this same person that the whole thing was 'rigged up' Imagine that!" He studied Maurice for a long time; then added, with quivering lips, "I am fully convinced now of the reality of your salvation. Thanks, Maurice, for all those times you talked to me about Jesus, and how He can change me and my heart. I want to know more. How about after school this evening?"

Maurice felt all choked up. "After school, God willing, Nick," he replied. "I'll be glad to."

Cherry saw him as he walked away from Nicholas. "Congratulations" she called, hurrying towards him.

"Congratulations from me, too!" Nicholas shouted to Maurice over the noise, laughter and joviality of his friends.

"Thanks, Nicholas. And thanks, Cherry" he answered as he fell in step with her.

"Maybe you didn't get that medal," Cherry stated, "but, of all people, you deserve one"

"Medals aren't all-important, you know," he answered with a broad smile "I feel good in knowing that I did my best on that essay. This, I feel, is what counts. And you know, Cherry, I believe it's the same in this wonderful Christian way. Jesus told His followers to be faithful. He never told them they had to be successful to get into Heaven; but He did say they -- and we, those of us who are His followers -- are to be faithful to Him and to His cause. Run the scriptural references in your concordance sometime on that word faithful. It will bless your soul," he promised.

"I know; I've done it."
"Well, I mean to be faithful to the Lord, Cherry. And now, back to the essay; second place or no place, my heart has a blessed calm and peace deep inside it. I feel truly happy that Nicholas took first place God has used it to open a new door for me."

"I guess Mandie's pretty upset, Maurice I congratulated her on her achievement and she burst out with, 'Don't congratulate me I'm just another had-tried-and-lost. Again. Talk about partiality and bias! I worked as hard as Nick and Maurice did; maybe even harder. And where did it get me? Huh!' With that, she pushed me aside and walked away."

Stopping and looking at Cherry, Maurice said, "We'll pray. I suppose congratulations for Mandie's hurt pride, right now, is like rubbing salt into an open wound."

"You know, Maurice," Cherry remarked. "I was just thinking of something. . . ."

"Care to share it?" he asked.

"It's kinda' strange, maybe, but kind of wonderful, too, I feel; in this life, with its contests and competitor and such like things, we have first place, second place, third place, et cetera, winners. But in the Christian race God has only one class -- they're all winners: first rate, first class winners for those who are faithful and make it into the City! And I mean to make it at any cost, Maurice By God's grace!"

"Amen. That makes two of us," came the quick reply.