

Going for the Gold Spiritually:
Realizing the Seriousness of the Christian Life
Hebrews 12:1-3

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Introduction: This coming weekend the Summer Olympic Games begin. World-class athletes will compete for the love of their sport and for the love of their country. Many of these men and women have trained years to be on the world's stage for these 16 days that are held only every four years. The analogy of the Christian life to athletic contests is a familiar theme of the New Testament. We will examine several of these passages in the weeks of these Olympics recognizing that God calls us to total surrender. Today we begin our series with understanding the serious nature of our calling as Christians.

I begin with a familiar text from the book of Hebrews. In fact, we have looked at this text even as recently as a few months ago, but I want to consider it from a different angle this morning than we did that particular Sunday. The anonymous writer of Hebrews writes to a group of Christians in the first century to encourage them to persevere in the midst of persecution. He writes to them in such a way as to remind them of their past so that they might find their strength for the present and the motivation for the future. I read this text similarly today though we are not under the persecution that these first century saints were.

Text: ¹ Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, ² keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God's throne.

³ For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, so that you won't grow weary and lose heart.

Introduction:

Eric Liddell is probably one of the most well known Christian Olympians. His story is depicted in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. Liddell qualified to compete in the 1924 games held in Paris. Weeks before the Olympics, he indicated to the Olympic committee that he would not be able to compete in the 100 meter run, his specialty, because the preliminary heats were going to be held on Sunday. Liddell, holding to the conviction that Sunday was the Sabbath day refused to run. Instead he preached that Sunday to a group of Scots living in Paris. On Tuesday of that week, he won the bronze medal in the 200 meter run, and later, he won Gold and set a new world record in the 400 meter run. Before the race began, an American trainer slipped him a scrap of paper that read with words recorded from the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel, "I will honor those who honor Me." As thrilling as this athletic accomplishment is I think we can look back on Liddell's life and say that his real mark left on this world was not as an athlete, but later as a missionary to China.

Eric stood against the tide of cultural acceptance and stood for his conviction. Eric realized that the race he was running in his relationship with God was far more important than any athletic race he would ever run.

Life for the people to whom Hebrews was originally written was hard. They had done the unthinkable and unpopular in their culture. They had turned from a religion of the law and by God's grace had become followers of Jesus Christ. Because of their conversion, some had lost life, and all had lost favor from the unconverted culture around them. Struggling to find strength for the next day, the writer of Hebrews writes them this encouraging word we have called Hebrews. The letter reaches its crescendo in the glorious 11th chapter that recaptures the stories of faith of heroes of the past. Having recounted that past, the writer now says, "Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us...."

The main verb in these three verses is "Let us run." All of the other verbs surrounding this main verb strengthen or modify this main verb. In other words, everything revolves around this basic idea of running. By my way of looking at this passage, there are five ideas that modify this main idea of running, which gives us some idea of the seriousness of the race we are running as Christians.

Marks of the One who Realizes the Seriousness of the Race

1. Recognizes the importance of faith.

There is no question that the point of chapter 11 is the importance of faith. And, chapter 11 forms the foundation for the encouragement and instruction that comes in chapter 12. As you move through chapter 11, you will note that there are three different levels of faith. First, there is the level of faith to believe that God exists. Then, there is the level of faith throughout most of the chapter that causes a person to depend upon God and follow God. Finally, and ultimately, there is the level of faith that causes a person to trust in God for that which is to come, including ultimately eternal life.

So, note in chapter 11....

- Faith is the key to every step in our race.
- Though faith is personal, we can grow in our faith by the faith of others.
- Others will be blessed by our example.

2. Recognizes the need to lay aside stuff.

Having encouraged the Christian runner to think upon the faith of others in the past as encouragement for the present, the writer of Hebrews then indicates that the runner must lay aside every weight (encumbrance, hindrance) and sin. I believe that the writer had two different things in mind—one general word and one specific word. We consider the more general word first.

"encumbrance" can mean anything

Whatever keeps you from total surrender is your encumbrance.

Sometimes our weight is that which might otherwise might be good.

3. Recognizes the need to lay aside sin.

Moving from the general encumbrance to the specific encumbrance, the writer addresses the most necessary subject of sin. To understand the full thrust of his persuasion, we need to consider verses four and five.

- How hard have you worked at resisting sin?
- What have you done in response to the rebuke from the Lord?

4. *Runs with endurance.*

The fourth idea of running is to run with endurance. To carry the athletic analogy out, it should be clear that the race before us is a marathon, not a sprint. We know the goal before us is eternal life, so we are to keep on running not to obtain eternal, but because God through Christ has obtained life for us. The Christian life is a call to endurance.

I read this week about an Olympian in this coming Olympics—Oscar Pistorius of South Africa. Oscar’s Olympic story is a story of endurance. Oscar was born with a disease in his legs and at 11 months old both of his legs were amputated at a point between his knees and ankles. He runs on special made carbon blades as they are called. In high school, he shattered his knee—endurance. When he runs, the rubbing causes his legs to bruise and bleed—endurance. In 2008, he was initially declared ineligible to compete because of the prosthetic legs, but then declared eligible, but he didn’t qualify—endurance. Now, he has qualified to run the 400 meter race for South Africa. He was given the 125th spot of 125 spots—endurance. Though he is a long shot to medal, we love this story of endurance. It is with that kind of endurance that we must run as followers of Christ.

5. *Runs with eyes on Jesus.*

There are many great examples of those who have run with endurance, but the greatest is Jesus, Himself. The two words translated source and perfecter of our faith are rich with meaning. The athletic aspect of this passage kind of leans us toward a possible translation of this first word with one possible usage of the Greek word—champion. Linked with the second word—perfecter, we might go with the initiator of our faith. Regardless, it is clear that our eyes are to be upon Jesus. He sets the pace.

I remember back in high school days having to run a mile in a certain amount of time for training purposes. One of the assistant coaches told us, “Just stay with me and I will make sure you finish in time.” That’s what Jesus does for us. “Keep our eyes on Him—the author (champion, initiator) and perfecter of our faith.

Conclusion: Eric Liddell died in a Chinese prison. In those years, Japanese rebels had come into China and placed Eric along with 1800 others in this particular prison camp. At one point, in a prisoner exchange program, Liddell was offered the opportunity to leave the prison, but he instead allowed a pregnant woman to go in his place. Not long after, he fell sick and died. Those around him at his death reported that his final words were, “It’s complete surrender.”

Indeed, it is. If we are going to be followers of Jesus, it’s complete surrender.