

HOW TO WIN IN GOD'S OLYMPIC GAMES

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Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us. 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 (Heb. 12:1-2).

"The Olympic Games were the most popular of the four festivals held in ancient Greece. They began hundreds of years before Christ, and were held every four years at Olympia. At first, the contests were reserved exclusively for athletes of that country, and from their inauspicious beginning, the games increased in importance until they attracted international attention. As time progressed new items were added to the original program, and the last race was for men clad in suits of armor. These runners were asked to complete two lengths of the stadium. Olympia was not a city, but a religious center where many of the statues of Grecian gods had been installed.

Funk and Wagnall's Encyclopedia tells us that athletes who lived in foreign countries were encouraged to bring their offerings to the gods, and display their prowess in the competitions which followed. According to the accepted belief, the earliest, and for long, the only contest was the stadion, or short foot race run over a distance of 630 feet. In the year 724 B.C. the diaulos, a race covering two lengths of the stadium, was introduced and four years later the dolichos, a long race of about 15,120 feet was arranged, when the contestants discarded the loincloth and ran naked. This custom was followed for many years. As time progressed wrestling, horse racing, chariot racing and other contests were added. The celebrations were held every four years until 194 A.D. when they were suppressed by the Roman Emperor, Theodosius, on the grounds they violated the spirit of Christianity. The first modern Olympic Games were held in April, 1896, and attracted athletes from the United States, Great Britain, and eleven other countries."

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The popularity of the ancient contests was evident when other nations began to emulate the example set by Greece. I have sat in the amphitheaters of ancient Ephesus, Petra, and the Colosseum in Rome. The gladiatorial combats where men fought to the death were some of the most repulsive scenes of ancient history. Excitement over these contests was very prevalent when the New Testament was being written, and it was to be expected that reference would be made to these attractions. The verses quoted at the beginning of this study are an example of that possibility. The Living Bible translates the text as follows:

Since we have such a huge crowd of men of faith watching us from the grandstands, let us strip off anything that slows us down, or holds us back, and especially those sins that wrap themselves so tightly around our feet, and trip us up; and let us run with patience the particular race that God has set before us (Heb. 12:1 TLB).

Mention has already been made of the discarding of the
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loincloth worn by ancient athletes. Probably during a contest the garment became loose, and sliding down the legs of the runner, entangled his feet, causing a serious loss of time. The writer to the Hebrews used this illustration to warn Christians

against such danger. The entire scenario presented in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews suggests scenes from the Olympic Festivals.

The Watching Audience... Hopeful

We are encompassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses—
(men of faith, watching from the grandstands.)

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews has been called "God's Hall of Fame." It is a great title, for the record supplies a list of famous people. From Abel to Abraham and Isaac to Moses and David, readers are introduced to many of God's prominent servants of whom the Almighty was proud. "They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the

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sword: they wandered in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; . . . they wandered in deserts and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth" (Heb. 11:37-38). Deprived of all material comforts, they were pilgrims filled by faith. "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:39-40). The text suggests the ancient spiritual athletes had finished their course and were watching our progress from the grandstands of eternity. Does this mean that loved ones who have preceded us into the presence of God are able to watch as we complete our journey? Will they applaud as we cross the finishing line and are welcomed into the presence of Christ?

The Weakening Athlete... Hindered

Let us lay aside every weight. Let us strip off everything that slows us down . . . especially those sins that wrap themselves so tightly around our feet and trip us up.

It is a cause for regret when an athlete who has consistently led the contestants begins to lose ground. Sometimes this can be prevented. To remember again the incident when the loincloth was discarded, failure may be prevented by resolution. No runner can give an excellent performance if he carries excessive weight. It was a simple matter to shed a loincloth, although the action caused embarrassment. The writer to the Hebrews did not suggest that believers should remove their clothing. The Christian race had nothing to do with garments. This advice referred to habits, customs, and anything capable of impeding spiritual progress. Sometimes affairs of the heart entangle feet. Any man who straps a load of cement to his back prior to a race advertises his stupidity.

The early Christians were urged to examine their equipment and discard anything unnecessary for the approaching challenge. It was interesting that the author differentiated between weights and sin which easily beset the runners. Even legitimate desires may be hindrances. Dedicated believers

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should never ask, "Is it wrong?" It is wiser to ask, "Is it necessary?" There is never need to analyze evil. Arguments cannot transform sin into righteousness. Athletes, whether they are running the race of life or competing in an international contest, must be ardent in training, anxious to win, and relentless in preparing for the events. Weakening runners never arouse cheers which are only earned by courage; disappointment always follows dropouts.

The Wise Advice... Helpful

Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.

There are three kinds of contestants: (1) The man who starts well but soon tires. He never makes any special effort, nor displays enthusiasm. Ultimately, he drops back and becomes an "also ran." When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he asked an important question: "Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?" (Gal. 5:7). As converts they had exhibited great interest, but apathy decreased their speed and ruined any possibility of their becoming victors. (2) Some contestants never intend to win but hope on-lookers will know they tried. Such men are never disappointed nor ashamed; they run for the exercise! There are many runners whose heart never inspires their feet. They never hurry,

but always succeed in getting nowhere! (3) There are athletes who only think of winning. They look toward the winning post and by every means possible endeavor to be the first runner to reach it. The men who competed in the Roman games did so for the dubious honor of wearing a crown of laurel leaves. Christians hope to win a crown of life which endures eternally.

Almost every athlete has a prototype whose example he tries to emulate. Even small children are attracted to famous sportsmen and throughout their lifetime hope to be like their idol. The same principle applies to Christians. They admire the Savior and acquire an intense yearning to be like Him. The writer to the Hebrews expressed that idea. He urged his

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readers to "look unto Jesus," the Divine Athlete who presented the world the most spectacular display of courage ever seen. To discard every hindrance is not sufficient to win a race. Runners need inspiration to avoid quitting; they need a renewal of energy to enable their continuance. Even the Lord encountered fatigue and weariness when Satan attempted to thwart His purpose. Yet, "He endured the cross, despising the shame," and having conquered, "is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). When believers follow His example, they become winners in God's Olympic Games.

The Waiting Acclamation... Happiness

And is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

I saw a huge crowd assembling in the main street of Melbourne, Australia, and wondered what had caused the excitement. When I asked what was taking place, a man replied, "Sir, in about five minutes, what is left of the First Australian division sent to Korea will be coming up this street to place a wreath on the cenotaph in memory of their fallen comrades. They were ambushed by the enemy and almost all were killed.

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Only a handful survived, and their ship docked last night. We are here to give them a great welcome." Soon I heard the music of an approaching band and saw policemen on motorcycles slowly forcing onlookers to the sidewalks. The mounted police followed, and afterward the musicians playing a lively march. Finally, as the small number of soldiers marched proudly along the street, millions of tiny pieces of paper came fluttering down from the high buildings.

Excited girls ducked beneath the outstretched arms of the police, ran into the street to kiss, hug, and embrace the soldiers, who, in spite of everything, never lost a stride. Seemingly unperturbed, they maintained their composure and proceeded on their way. I remember that when I entered Australia, I was involved in an argument with an unpleasant customs official. My "welcome" to the country was nothing like that of the soldiers. The commencement of my stay in the country left much to be desired.

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Some day, at the end of life's journey, I shall reach my true homeland. Will the angels line the streets of gold to cheer? Will the city of God reecho with jubilation when I arrive? Will I be escorted to the throne of God to hear: "Well done thou good and faithful servant . . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord?" The apostle Peter was contemplating such a moment when he wrote: "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 Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:10-11). It should be emphasized that many may not be joyfully received. Peter said: "If ye do these things." Everything will depend upon the quality of service we render on earth.

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