

**SPIRITUAL OLYMPICS**  
***“RUNNING FOR THE GOLD”***

**By Dr. J.L. Williams**

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## Dedication



**Stakwell Yurenimo**  
*Founder & Director*  
**Samburu Sports Camp**  
South Horr, Kenya



**Right-** Stakwell and his Bride, Francesca at their wedding.

**Below-** Stakwell, Francesca and their daughter, Wendy



## INTRODUCTION

Right now the eyes of world are on China and the upcoming XXIX Summer Olympics. Top athletes from all over the world will converged there to compete for the *gold*, *silver* or *bronze metals* in their areas of athletic prowess. Many have been in training almost all of their lives for these two weeks of competition. Unfortunately, the majority of the athletes will go home empty-handed. They will not take any medals home from Beijing. That's because of what the Apostle Paul wrote: "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only one receives the prize?*" (1 Cor. 9:24)

So, this summer in Beijing there will be *many* runners...jumpers...vaulters...swimmers...rowers...sailors ...divers...boxers...archers...fencers...weight-lifters...cyclers...tumblers...equestrians – individually competing in addition there will be tennis players, volley ball players, baseball players, softball players, basketball players, badminton players, handball players, football players and hockey players – all competing as a team. Virtually every known sport from triathlon to Taekwondo will be represented. But again, *most will go home losers*. The vast majority will leave Beijing without a medal hanging around their necks.

And the Olympic athletes who lose by milli-seconds or millimeters will forever second-guess themselves. They will

be haunted by *"if only I had..."* Being a millimeter or milli-second away from victory is difficult to live with! For those "almost

winners," their disappointment will be especially intense. Their loss will linger in their minds for the rest of their lives. And few of them will ever have the chance of making another Olympic competition. It will literally be a "once in a lifetime experience" for each athlete.

However, all of the athletes – whether winners or losers – will go home with the knowledge that they were privileged to be on an Olympic Team. That very fact puts them in one of the most elite athletic fraternities in history. They at least had the thrill of "competing for the gold" – while most of humanity spent their lives "sitting in the stands." While the rest were spectators, they were the participants and all the eyes of the world were on them.

The Bible teaches that the eyes of the universe are also on *you*. You too are involved in running a *marathon race* – and it is literally the "race of your life." As exciting as the Olympics are, your race has *eternal consequences*. It too will result in a clear "win" or "lose" finish. And your race will also ultimately lead you to the *judge's box* – and hopefully to the *winner's platform*. But your individual judgment will not be made by fallible human judges. Your competition in the "game of life" will be judged by the Lord Himself. And this Judge "...does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34) but "...judges each man's work *impartially*" (1 Pet.1:17).



Although God is *impartial* in His judgments, I want you to know that *He wants you to win!* As the *Master Coach* of the universe, *He is on your side!* If you are a Christian, you are the “home team.” And since God created the world, He wants you to have “home court advantage.” But most of all, He sent His Son into the world to become your *Savior, Lord and Master Coach*. That’s why the Lord Jesus – in the prime of His life – faced your greatest competition on your behalf. He went nose-to-nose with the evil one who is the saboteur and spoiler of the “game of life.” He faced death, hell and the grave to make you a winner.

As a result of His resurrection, Jesus alone is God’s *Champion* who faced and defeated Satan and his *hellish team*. Now He is your resurrected and exalted *Master Coach* who forever intercedes for you before the Father – so that you will be an *eternal winner* (Heb. 7:25). In addition, He sent His Holy Spirit to *indwell, inspire, instruct* and *empower* you so that you will be able to “...run to win.”

Also, our *Master Coach* has not left us without a “Sports’ Manual” to help train us for victory. It is known as the *Bible*, and it speaks a great deal about *running* and *competing*. You might also think of the Bible as God’s *Sports’ Illustrated*, because in it you can read about the lives of many Christian athletes. Their very real life stories graphically illustrate the principles that are taught in God’s “Sports’ Manual.” Some ran well, others did not. Many won their competition, other lost. Some became

outstanding champions who were ultimately inducted in the “Spiritual Sports’ Hall of Fame” (Hebrews 11). They “ran for the goal” with all of their lives – and *won!*

Sadly, others failed miserably and ended up in the “Spiritual Sports Hall of Shame.” And their stories are also recorded there for our instruction. As Paul said: “Now these things occurred as *examples* to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did...and were written down as *warnings* for us” (I Cor. 10:6, 11).

But whether they were winners or losers, their stories in God’s *Sports Illustrated* are important for us to study. That’s what the Bible is for. When it comes to biographies, it totally “tells it like it is.” When recounting a story about someone, it tells “the good, the bad and the ugly.” There is no touch-up...no gloss-over...no air-brushing. That’s because “...everything that was written in the past was written to *teach us*, so that through *endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope*” (Rom. 15:4).

The key words there are *endurance* and *encouragement*. When you have those twin graces, you have *hope*. Without *hope* you cannot live...you cannot run...you cannot compete...you cannot win. When an athlete loses hope, the game is over. Without hope they will just be “going through the motions...marking time...running out the clock...waiting for the buzzer.

But God's Training Manual was written to give you *endurance...encouragement ...hope*. And that's what I hope this study will freshly inspire in your life. So let's get ready to dig into God's *Sports Illustrated*. Let's read and learn from some of His great spiritual champions. Let's study how they lived...how they trained...how they competed...how they won their heat.

When you read the letters of the Apostle Paul, it is obvious that he was no stranger to the Olympic Games. After all, they originated in the world of his day. And Paul often traveled and worked in places like Greece and Corinth, where the Olympics were held every few years. Is it any wonder then that Paul uses so many *athletic metaphors*, or *sports figures of speech* to illustrate his own Christian life. He especially emphasizes this when he was writing to a young spiritual athlete he was coaching and mentoring. His name was Timothy.

This young man was a fresh recruit for the Christian Team. He was a rookie. He was not even a "walk-on." He was personally recruited by Coach Paul because he saw his potential as a Christian athlete. Timothy had just gotten his jersey and was rather timidly and tenuously beginning to play the game of Christian leadership (II Tim. 1:7). He felt awkward in the uniform and clumsily used the equipment.

By now, Paul was a seasoned veteran coach of many seasons. He knew that Timothy would need a lot of careful training and personal mentoring in order to become a

spiritual champion. He not only took him “under his wing,” he also wrote him letters of encouragement to keep him in the game. Listen to this spiritual athletic instruction to Timothy:

“...*train yourself* to be Godly. For *physical training* is of some value, but *godliness* has value for all things, holding promise for both the *present life* and the *life to come*” (I Tim. 4:12).

It is interesting to note that the word that Paul used here for “train yourself” is the Greek work, *gymnae*. It is easy to see that this is where we get our English word *gymnasium* from. So, Paul was using a word from the Olympics of his day to train this young athlete. He in essence told Timothy to go to God’s “Gold Gym” daily for spiritual exercise.

Paul further reminded Timothy of the unique benefits of a “total workout” that includes *body, mind* and *spirit*. Paul did not in any way discourage or disparage the importance of “physical training.” However, he did point out the superiority of “spiritual training” that resulted in “godliness.” While *physical exercise* has benefit for the body and for this “present life,” *spiritual exercise* produces both *temporal* and *eternal* results. As Paul said: “...Godliness has value for *all things*, holding promise for both the *present life* and the *life to come*.”

I don’t know about you, but I’ve never known of a YMCA, Gym, Spa or Health Club that could guarantee those

results! That kind of “total work out” only comes in God’s *Gold Gym!* Only His spiritual Training Manual – the Bible – can put you through that level of *spiritual calisthenics* that will result in *total health*. And getting into that kind of spiritual, mental emotional and physical shape will not be easy or quick. But in the end it will make you a *gold medalist*. It will make you a *winner* in the “game of life.”

And a winner is exactly what God also wants you to become! He created and redeemed you so that you would become a *gold medalist...a world-class athlete...a spiritual Olympian*. He wants you to “...run to win.” He wants you to be a “Christian champion” just like His Son is. At the end of the race, when it is *judgment time*, He wants you to be on the *winner’s platform!*

So let’s open God’s *Sports’ Illustrated* and read about how we too can become a *winner*. Let’s look at the principles that will help us “run to win.” As I have studied His Training Manual I have found at least *10 Principles of Running* that we must master if we are going to be *spiritual champions*. Let’s look at them carefully one at a time.

First, if we are going to “run for the gold,” we must first....



**RUN WITH *FOCUS***

That simply means that we must develop a “winning attitude.” The single greatest challenge for an athlete is not just *disciplining his body* – it’s *disciplining his mind*. An athlete may go into a competition in peak physical condition, but if he has a “losing attitude” – he will *lose!* That’s why *every loss first takes place in the mind*. Before you lose an *external battle* you always lose an *internal battle* first.

That’s the reason why winning athletes must get “psyched up” before a game. They must *focus their mind on winning*. They must *envision* themselves as the winners at the end of the game. They must *focus on the goal* – as well as *focus on the gold!* Their desire must not just be to *finish* – but to *win!*

Tragically, most people, including many Christians, have a *losing attitude*. It often developed when they were children. Either their parents or friends knowingly or unknowingly *coached them to become losers*. Through a thousand words and deeds, they imprinted their impressionable young mind with a “loser’s attitude.” When it came to

playing games and sports, they were taught to be “good losers.” How sad! Why? Because *good losers – LOSE!*

We certainly need to teach our children to be *gracious losers* who can admit it when they are *out-played* or when they *under-played*. But we need to *make every loss a learning experience*. That way the next time they will have a better chance at *winning*. But to constantly say: “*Now Johnny, don’t get mad because you lost – be a good sport! Be a good loser! Winning is not everything*” – is to set them up for a *life-style of losing*.

I *hate to lose* – at anything! Whatever I do, I try to *win*. That’s just my nature. Jesus did not die on the cross to make me a “good loser!” He was not resurrected from the grave in order that I might learn to “live with defeat.” He did not give me the power of His Holy Spirit so that I would *lose in life* – but so that I would *win in life!*

Notice then, how the Apostle Paul coached young Timothy to develop and maintain a *winning attitude*:

“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? *Run in such a way that you may win*” (I Cor. 9:24).

It is easy to see that Paul was mentoring Timothy to become a *winner* – not a *loser*. That’s why Paul did not say to his young spiritual athlete:



*“Timothy, I want you to learn to be a good loser in life. You know that in a race ‘all run, but only ONE receives the prize’ – and it probably won’t be you! In addition, the judges are prejudiced against our team, the devil hates us, and the world is against us – so you might as well accept reality and learn to be a good loser!”*

If that would have been Paul’s advice to young Timothy, he would have lost the race before he ever got to the starting blocks! Because Timothy’s father had largely been an “absentee father,” he already struggled with a sense of *insecurity* and *inferiority*. Timothy already agonized over his weak male ego. No doubt he felt like a masculine wimp because he had primarily been raised by his mother and grandmother (II Tim. 1:5). So he grew up in a female-dominated world that gave him a good spiritual foundation but little or no masculine identity. As a result, he battled with a *defeatist attitude* when it came to being a “real man.”

Like a wise coach with a timid, fearful athlete, Paul began to coach young Timothy. As a wise surrogate father-figure, Paul began to mentor Timothy to “renew his mind” with a *winning attitude*. He saw in this young spiritual athlete what Timothy could not see in himself. And with sensitive love and bold faith, Paul began to call these things forth in his young adopted spiritual son. He wrote and spoke positive affirmations into Timothy’s tender young spirit to offset his negative, defeatist mind-set. Listen to a few of the positive exhortations he wrote to Timothy to help “renew his mind.”

And note how Paul started by addressing Timothy with endearing words of affection...

*“My dear son, I thank God...as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers...I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. I have been reminded of your sincere faith...I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands....God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and self-discipline...So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord...who has called us to a holy life...What you heard from me, keep as a pattern of sound teaching with faith and love in Christ Jesus....Guard the good deposit (coaching) that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us...You, then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus...Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus...Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules...Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this” (II Tim. 2:2-2:2:7).*

What incredible coaching! Every young spiritual athlete needs a coach who will believe in them like Paul believed in Timothy. Every young Christian needs a loving and encouraging mentor like Paul. Only then can they begin to

get “off the bench” and out onto the playing field. Then they can begin to “...run in such a way that they can *win!*”

You see, *renewing your mind* and *running to win* are inseparable team-mates. For any winning athlete, *the mind must ultimately rule over the body* – not the reverse. Otherwise the “tail wags the dog!” That means that the desires of the body must constantly be subjugated to the will of the mind. The body must be disciplined to submit to and serve the desires of the mind. In a very real way, the body must “sacrifice itself” to the will of the mind of the athlete. Listen to these familiar words by Paul about this very thing:

“I urge you, brothers...to *offer your bodies as living sacrifices*, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.”

But where and how does this take place? In the mind, that’s where. Paul went on to say:

“Do not *conform* any longer to the pattern of this world, but be *transformed by the renewing of your mind.*”

And one of the crucial ways you begin to “renew your mind” is by getting rid of negative, defeatist thinking. As Coach Paul wrote in another letter: “*Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*” (II Cor. 10:5). The

principle is simple: *“If you don’t take the thought captive – the thought will take you captive.”*

So you begin to *reprogram* and *renew* your mind by “...taking every thought captive” that is unworthy of a winning spiritual athlete. Rather than continue to listen to all of that negative...defeatist...losing...unworthy...I can’t do it...I’m no good thinking – you “take it captive.” You force it to surrender. You make it cry “Uncle!” You make it give up. By the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit you make it bow the knee to Christ and surrender to His Lordship. You increasingly “...take every thought captive and make it obey Christ.” And it’s both a *crisis* and *process*. It’s something that you must begin at some point in time and then continue the rest of your life. Then you will be on the winning path to victory!

You see, a winning athlete must develop the mind-set of his coach. Successful coaching is to get the *mind of the coach* into the *mind of the player*. He must understand and develop the same pattern of thinking and playing that his coach has. Then the coach’s will becomes the athlete’s will. They are on the same page. They are playing the same game – but from different locations.

At this point of development even though the coach is on the sidelines, the athlete is playing the game with his coach’s mind-set. As he plays the game he continues to hear the instructions of his coach ringing in his inner ears – not just yelling at him from the sidelines. That’s why a

winning athlete cannot be out on the track, field, court or playing field with a different mind-set from his coach. The coach and the player must have unity of mind, heart and will in order to be able to win the game *together*. That's when the athlete has an "inner coach" who is with him all the time guiding him from the inside out – whether or not he is physically present. For the Christian athlete, this "inner coach" is the Holy Spirit.

That's why Paul said that when the Christian athlete gives his body to God as a "living sacrifice" by "renewing his mind" – then he will be able to "...test and approve what God's will is – His *good, pleasing and perfect will*" (Rom. 12:1-2).

And please remember this crucial principle: "*It is absolutely impossible to improve upon God's will for your life!*" Because He is a perfect God, *His will is perfect*. While you can disapprove of it or diminish it, you cannot improve upon it. That's because it is *perfectly designed by God to make you a winner in life*. So, my spiritual athlete, never rebel against God's "...good, pleasing and perfect will" for you so that you win at the game of life!

Therefore, if you are going to be the *winner* God created you to be and wants you to be, then you too must develop a "winning attitude." You must "run in *focus*." You must keep your mind *positive*. You must *focus on winning* – not losing. You must "...run in such a way that you may *win!*"

But secondly, if you are going to *win at the game of life*,  
you also must...

**RUN WITH SCRIPTURE**

This spiritual *principle of running* is a necessary teammate of the previous principle of “Running in *Focus*.” That’s because the greatest thing to keep you *focused on winning* is to stay *focused on the Word*. *Winning* and the *Word* always go together. They are inseparable running mates.

As we are seeing, the Bible alone is God’s “Training Manual” to make you a *winner*. It is God’s “Book of Champions.” As you “...eat the Word” daily (Deut. 8:3; Jer. 15:16) it will keep you healthy. It will nurture the “inner man” and “inner woman” (Eph. 3:16). It will strengthen and empower you for the game of life from the inside out. You will joyfully discover that the Bible is the real “Breakfast of Champions!” And like all good cereal, it especially tastes good with *honey* (Ps. 119:103; Ezek. 3:3). So the Bible alone can make you a *spiritual champion* for both *time* and *eternity*.

Notice what the Psalmist says about God’s Word as he describes it with an athletic metaphor: “God sends His commands to the earth, *His Word runs swiftly*” (Ps. 147:15).

You see, because God's Word is "...*living and active*" (Heb. 4:12) it has *power... authority... dynamism... speed... swiftness!* As a result, God's Word does not just lie around gathering dust like most people's Bibles. It does not just sit around on the shelf or coffee table doing nothing. No. God's Word "...*runs swiftly*" throughout the world to accomplish God's purposes. And one of those purposes is that you would become a *winner* by also *running swiftly in the Word!*

This reminds us that all too many of us "*run slowly*" when it comes to *accepting and applying* God's Word to every area of our lives. So often we do not immediately respond to the promptings of our Divine Coach. Far too many of God's people want to "*run swiftly in the world*" – but "*run slowly in the Word.*" As I oftentimes say: "Too many Christians want to live like hell on the way to heaven!" And that will make you a *loser every time*. To try and capture the best of both worlds is to forfeit both.

Carefully read and reflect over these words of coaching that Paul gave to an earlier group of athletes who played on a 1st century "church team."

*"...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved*



generation, in which you *shine like stars* in the universe as you hold out the *word of life* – in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that *I did not run* or labor for nothing” (Phil. 2:12-16).

Like a wise coach, Paul exhorts them to “work out” in their daily lives what he and the Holy Spirit have already “worked in.” And they were to do so “...without complaining or arguing” – something a good coach will not tolerate among his athletes! They were to be “...blameless and pure...without fault.” That meant no “bad press” from licentious living, sexual immorality, tobacco, alcohol abuse or performance enhancing drugs. They were to “...shine like stars” by living and running by the “...word of life.”

So once again, you just cannot separate the *Word* from *winning*. Great spiritual athletes always learn to “sprint in the Scriptures” to the finish line!

So Paul clearly wanted his “church team” to be “*God’s stars and all stars*” – who would brightly shine in the world like the physical stars that light up the night. Then and only then would Paul’s coaching of them be successful. Then he and the world would know that through his spiritual coaching of them, he “...did not run in vain.”

This is a natural transition to another crucial *principle of running*. If we are going to be “God’s stars,” we must...



**RUN WITH OBEDIENCE**

*Obedience is necessary for winning.* It's that simple. Every winning athlete knows that he or she must *obey the coach* and *obey the rules*. There is an official "Olympic Oath" that is recited at the Opening Ceremony of all Olympic Games. It is repeated by one specially selected athlete in behalf of all of the others. It says:

"I promise that we shall take part in these Olympic Games, *respecting and abiding by the rules that govern them*, in the spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of the sport and the honor of our team."

So every Olympian enters the game with a pledge to "obey by the rules." Without that common commitment among all of the athletes, the various games and competitions would not be possible. No rules, no games. It's that simple. It is the rules that regulate the games and make them possible. Every athlete must compete and "run within the rules" if he or she is going to be a winner. To break or disobey the

rules is to be disqualified from the Olympics. Therefore, *obedience is a necessary prerequisite to winning.*

It's the same in the Christian life. As we saw in our previous *principle of running*, it is not enough to just *know* God's Word, we must also *obey God's Word* and *apply* God's Word. Since God "...sends His command to the earth, and His word *runs swiftly*," we must be *swift in obedience*. That's why Jesus said: "If you *love Me* you will *obey* what I command" (Jn. 14:15, 21). My wife and I often taught our four children when they were growing up that "*delayed obedience was disobedience!* Once we had given a "command", they were to *immediately obey*. They were not to delay or procrastinate. They were not to postpone their obedience until the following day or next week when they "felt like it." They were to "...run *swiftly*" in the direction of obedience – or we had a paddle to help motivate them in the right direction!

When you pause to think about it for a moment, the only reason we procrastinate in our obedience to God is because we secretly believe that to do so is to give up something good. As I said earlier, *we think that our will is better than God's will*. We believe that *our plan* is better than *God's plan*. We think that obeying God is *bondage*, while "doing our own thing" is really *freedom*. Just the opposite is true – as the Psalmist testified: "...I run the path of Your command, for *You have set my heart free*" (Ps. 119:32). That's why James said it is "...the perfect law that gives *freedom*" (Ja. 1:25).

When we “...run the path of God’s command,” we experience *freedom of heart*. So here’s the simple spiritual and athletic principle: “*Obedience equals freedom*.” Therefore, the sooner and quicker we stop running *FROM* God’s Word and start *running TO God’s Word* and *IN God’s Word*, the sooner we will experience *freedom and victory!* Therefore, “running in Jesus” rather than “running from Jesus” is to start down the road to victory.

Jesus likewise said: “...You will *know the truth* and the *truth will set you free*...if the Son sets you *free*, you will be *free indeed*” (Jn. 8:32, 36). It is crucial to note here that the word that Jesus used here for “know” means to *know by experience* rather than just to *know theoretically*. There are millions of Christians who know God’s Word *theologically* and *theoretically* – but not *experientially*. They know it “in their heads” – but not “in their hearts.” It is only in *knowing truth by personal experience that sets you free*.

Let me give you an example. I used to teach swimming at the YMCA, That’s because I had become a WSI or *Water Safety Instructor* when I was in college. So I taught many kids how to swim. We would first show them the chart with the picture of the various swimming positions. The dog paddle...the overhand stroke...the breast stroke...the side stroke...the butterfly stroke – from the simplest to the more complex. We taught them how to breath...how to cup their hands...how the kick their legs. We taught them all of the moves necessary for becoming a good swimmer.

We would first have them master these “swimming techniques” by the side of the pool. They would first “swim in the air” as they practiced the various strokes. Then we would put them in the shallow end of the pool. But finally there came the moment of truth when we moved from *information to application* – in the *deep end of the pool!* It was only when they learned to apply these swimming principles in the *deep water*, that they experienced the “freedom of swimming.” Then the water became their *friend* that supported them – rather than their *enemy* that sought to drown them. No one can be call a “swimmer” who can only go through the motions of swimming “in the air” or “on dry land.” A “swimmer” by definition is someone who has mastered the water and made it his servant.

The same principle applies in every area of truth and learning. Remember: *“Telling is not teaching and listening is not learning. We learn to do by doing.”* It is only “doing” that brings knowledge out of the theoretical and into experience. Therefore, we can only say we “know” truth in a particular area of discipline when we have *applied it...when we have personally experienced it...when we have “walked it” or “swum it” or “run it.* Then and only then can we really say we *know the truth* in that area and *enjoy the freedom* that comes only through moving from *information to application.* That’s when we become a “doer of the Word” rather than just a “hearer of the Word” (Ja. 1:22).

Listen to how Paul mentors Timothy onto victory with another similar athletic metaphor. What I shared about swimming, he relates to any area of athletic competition.

“If anyone *competes as an athlete* he does not receive the *victor’s crown* unless he *competes according to the rules*” (II Tim. 2:5).

There are several important things to notice here. First, Coach Paul starts by saying: “*If anyone competes as an athlete...*” That reminds us of the sad fact that most Christians are not “out on the playing field.” They are passively “sitting up in the stands.” They are *spectators* rather than *participants*. They are not *athletes* competing in the “game of life” – they are *observers*. They “sit on the side lines” rather than “run for the finish line.” They are the passive “bench warmers” who go to church week after week and sing “*Standing on the Promises*” – while doing nothing more exciting than “sitting on the premises!” As a result, most of them are not *competitors* – but *complainers*.

So this is a *conditional principle* that begins with the “BIG IF.” Paul says: “*If anyone competes as an athlete...*” So the BIG QUESTION for you is this: “*Are you actively competing as God’s athlete?*”

Secondly, Paul reminds Timothy that he must “...compete according to the *rules*.” That meant that he must *run in obedience* to God’s rules. Every athletic competition has very clear and specific rules that govern the game. And

there are always *referees* around to enforce the rules. None of the athletes are free to just go out and “do their own thing.” As they play the game they cannot “make up their own rules as they go along.” To break the rules is to have the referees *blow their whistles or throw their flags* – and if necessary to *throw the athlete out of the game*.

The “game of life” works the same way. Because this is a *moral universe* created by a Holy God of “*law and order*,” there are *rules* we must live by if we are going to be *winners* rather than *losers*. And the *spiritual laws* are just as certain as the *physical laws*. To try and live in constant violation of God’s laws is to *self-destruct*. To try and “make up your own rules as you go along” is sheer insanity. It is playing Russian roulette with a fully loaded machine gun. You just cannot win! In reality, it is absolutely impossible to “break God’s laws.” It is the other way round. What really happens is not that we “break God’s laws,” we “break ourselves against God’s laws.”

The folly of trying to break God’s moral laws is like a man trying to break the Law of Gravity by jumping off a skyscraper. He may experience a few seconds of exhilarating freedom. He may have an incredible adrenalin rush as he jumps. He may momentarily live in the illusion that he is flying. But there a rude awakening quickly approaching! There is a “sudden stop” at the bottom awaiting him that will be devastating!



So by jumping off of a tall building, our daring athlete will not break the Law of Gravity. He will break every bone in his body *against the Law of Gravity*. He will not break the Law of Gravity – the Law of Gravity will break him. God’s truth and moral law is just as inviolate in every area of life. Therefore, my friend, be sure to “...compete *according to the rules*” if you want to be a winner in life. You can’t “beat the rules” – but they can beat you. However, if you will “run within the rules” they will be your friend and guardrails that will direct you on to victory.

Thirdly, it was only *if* Timothy “...competed as an athlete” and only *if* he did so “...according to the rules” that he would ultimately “...receive the *victor’s crown*.” The Greek word for “crown” here is *stephanos*, from which we get the word “Stephen.” It referred to the *temporary crown*, or “wreath of flowers”, that was put on the heads of the winning athletes at the ancient Olympic games. In those days there were no gold, silver or bronze medals – just a wreath of flowers. But before the victory day was over, the flowers in their winning crown had already *wilted* and *faded*.

But by contrast, Christian athletes compete to win a “...crown that will last *forever*” (1 Cor. 9:25). Jesus called this crown the “crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). And the Apostle Peter said ours is an “...inheritance that can never *perish, spoil or fade*” because it is “...kept in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:4). If you are faithful...if you *run by faith*...if you *listen to the Coach*...if you *obey the rules* – you will be a

*winner.* You will be awarded the “victor’s crown” that will last forever.

But there is a fourth *principle of running* that you must master. It builds naturally upon the principle of “running in *obedience.*” This principle teaches that you must...

**RUN WITH WISDOM**

A winning athlete must have more than just a fit body. He or she must have “athletic wisdom” about how best to play the game. That kind of wisdom goes far beyond a basic knowledge of the game. Understandably, every young athlete must learn the basic fundamentals of the sport. That’s the starting point. That’s what you learn from books, watching the game played, video simulation and lots of time in the locker room at “chalk sessions.”

But “athletic wisdom” about a particular game comes from hours, months and years of experience actually playing the game. And there is no one who has done more of that than the coach. So every athlete must learn to see their coach as the repository of “athletic wisdom.” After all, the coach is older...he has lived longer...has more experience...has many seasons under his belt...has already mastered the sport...has played and coached the game for many years...has produced many winning athletes...has won many championships...has been in victory lane...has many trophies on his shelves. So the coach has a wisdom and perspective that no young athlete has. He has the “big picture” from many years of

experience that is his frame of reference. Therefore, *winning* cannot be separated from this *wisdom*.

Certainly one of the key places that every promising young athlete needs good coaching and training is in the *stewardship of his body*, what we earlier called being “living sacrifices.” That means that they must learn to not only *obey their coach* and *obey the rules* – but also to *obey their bodies*. They must know when to “hold back” and when to “press forward.” They must be sensitive to injuries that must have time for healing. To ignore that is to bring a promising athletic career to a premature ending.

Young athletes are often filled with *energy, exuberance* and *enthusiasm*. They seem to have boundless energy triggered by the steady supply of adrenaline and testosterone in their blood streams. This often gives them a false sense of invincibility. They feel they are immortal or invulnerable. They do not know their limitations. They do not know when to stop. They do not yet know their physical limits of endurance. They feel they can continuously “burn the candle at both ends” without getting burned. And the result is that they often prematurely “burn out.”

But a wise athlete who is going to have longevity in his sport must have the wisdom to know how to pace himself...when to call a time out...when to walk off the field...when to rest...when to go to the bench...when to go to the locker room...when to sit out an inning – or even an entire game or season. To ignore these things is to “hit the

wall...to crash and burn...to go down in flames.” It is to do what Proverbs calls “playing the fool” (Prov. 12:15; 14:16; 15:5; 26:11; 27:22; 28:26, etc).

Also, a wise athlete must especially have the wisdom to know when to *retire*, when to “hang it up.” He must be able to recognize when his athletic days of competition are over. When to quit “playing the game” and when to start “coaching others.” And when they are not wise enough to make that call – their aging and alienating bodies usually do it for them!

As I mentioned above, the Bible often makes a contrast between the “fool” and the “wise man.” The *fool* either does not know God’s laws or he knowingly disobeys them. The *wise man*, on the other hand, is one who “runs to the law” and “runs within the law.” The fool’s path leads to *disease, disorder, defeat, death and destruction*. The wise man’s path leads to *life, health, prosperity, liberty and victory*.

Here again, most people have bought into the satanic lie that *God’s Word* and *God’s wisdom* are archaic...out-of-date...binding...restrictive. They wrongly believe that obedience to God’s Word *means* that you give up freedom ...excitement...fun...thrills...adventure...happiness...good times. When people like this think of God at all, they envision Him as a humbugging Scrooge...an old ogre...a frowning deity...a divine policeman...a celestial kill-joy.

That's why Paul wrote and reminded Timothy: "We know that the *law is good* if one uses it properly" (I Tim. 1:8). The proper understanding and application of the law brings *liberty* – not *bondage*. Once again that's why James referred to it as "...the perfect law that gives *freedom*" (Ja. 1:25). God's laws, then, in every area of life, are meant for our *protection...our peace...our prosperity*.

Please remember this principle: "Behind the *law of God* is the *love of God*." You cannot separate one from the other. *Nature's Laws* are a reflection of *Nature's Lord* – who is a *God of love*. Therefore, *love* and *law* are companions – not enemies. And when you embrace one, you automatically embrace the other. They are God-given coaches and trainers to make you a winner.

Paul succinctly expressed it this way: "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10). That simply means that when you *live by love* – *God's love* – you automatically *fulfill the law*. However, you can *live by law* and *not live by love* – as we will see later in this study. But when we "run in the Word" we "run in wisdom" – which means that we will run our race in *love*.

The wise man of Proverbs personified *wisdom* as a *woman* that his son should *persistently pursue* and *passionately love*. Using athletic metaphors, he said that this "woman of wisdom" would lead him to victory, glory and honor, if he will only embrace her as his life-long lover:

“...she will protect you; *love her* and *she will watch over you*. Wisdom is *supreme*; therefore get wisdom, thought it cost all you have, get understanding. *Esteem her*, and she will exalt you; *embrace her*, and she will honor you. She will set a *garland of grace* on your head and present you with a *crown of splendor*.”

Solomon assured his son that if he would “*run in wisdom*,” he would end in *victory*:

“When you *walk* your steps will not be hampered; when you *run* you will not stumble. Hold on to instruction; do not let go. *Guard her for she is your life*” (Prov. 4:6-13).

How many world class athletes, famous politicians and noted Christian leaders have “stumbled” morally in the last several decades – simply because they did not “run in *wisdom*.” For most of them, it was not a problem of “not *knowing* the truth. It was a clear problem of “not *doing* the truth” that they already knew. Rather than “run in wisdom”, they “ran away from wisdom.” As a result, they “stumbled” and fell into defeat and dishonor by pursuing “worldly women” rather than the “women of wisdom.”

So, if you want to be a winner in life, *run in wisdom*. And you can only *run in wisdom* by *running in the Word*. If you will make the *wisdom of the Word* your life-long lover and

running mate, she will lead you to *victory lane...the winner's platform...the gold medal.*

And to help make that happen, you also must...



**RUN WITH ACCOUNTABILITY**

As we saw above, it is not at all uncommon for an athlete to stumble and fall in a race or a game. However, the stumble or fall does not necessarily take them out of the competition. It is how they respond to it that is the key. Do they *recover* swiftly? Do they *rebound* quickly? Do they jump back up on their feet...shake it off...regain their confidence...refocus themselves – and get back into the game?

Often times what I call our “rebound time” is largely dependent upon our *accountability to others*. This begins with the people who are the closest to us and know us best. People like our spouse, our associates, our teammates, our trainers and our coach. If we have others around us to whom we are accountable, then usually we will not stumble and fall nearly as much. And when we do, our “rebound time” will be much quicker. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes expresses this principle this way:

*“Two are better than one...if one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!” (Ecc. 4:9-10)*

We all need *partners, teammates, mentors, trainers, coaches and cheer-leaders*. People who are “on our team” and “on our side.” People who believe in us and want to see us succeed. Indeed, “Two are better than one” and “...a cord of *three strands* is not quickly broken” (Ecc. 4:9, 12). So who are those “two or three” close companions who are surrounding you and holding you accountable? You just can’t make it through the marathon of life without them.

We not only need people around us who will “cheer us on,” we also need a few key people close to us who will *hold us accountable*, people who will “...speak the truth in love” to us so that we will “...grow up in all things” (Eph. 4:15). None of us will “grow up” without some serious accountability in our lives. And it starts with our parents. Then our accountability web spreads to our teachers, friends, mentors and coaches.

At times we all need people who will “get in our face” and “ask us the hard questions.” We need people who have the *love and guts* to tell us to “hit the bench” or “go to the locker room.” And in some cases, we need people who have the authority to tell us to “turn in our jersey” and “hang it up for good;” people who have the moral courage to tell us that “this season of our life has ended...the game is over...our career is finished.”

Athletics is always a *team effort*. There may be only one person out on the court or track – but they have gotten there through the efforts, coaching and mentoring of a lot of other people. When we stand on the winner's platform, we always do so on someone else's shoulders. So a *victory for one* is a *victory for all* – and a *defeat for one* is a *defeat for all*. That's why Paul rightly said: "*None of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone*" (Rom 14:7). Likewise, if a person is a real champion he does not *train for himself alone...play for himself alone...run for himself alone...complete for himself alone*. He also does it for his spouse...his family...his coach...his teammates...his country. If he or she is a Christian, than above all else, they "...do it for the Lord" (I Cor. 10:31-33; Col. 3:23).

That's why there is no place in athletics for the "show boat"...the "prima donna"...the "ball-hog"...the "spot-light freak"...the "ego-driven athlete" who has an inflated self-image simply because he is "full of hot air"...the "superstar" who is intoxicated with himself and acts like he is God's gift to his team...his fans...the world! The old bellicose boast of heavy weight boxing champ, Mohammed Ali: "*I am the Greatest!*" is not characteristic of true champions! Truly great athletes have a sense of *humility* about them. When they are thrust into the spotlight, they share their glory and honor with those who got them there: their parents, coach, trainer, teammates, cheerleaders, friends.

The Apostle Paul was concerned that he never “...run in vain” by “running alone.” Even though he had met the risen Christ on the Damascus Road in a one-on-one encounter...even though he was called and commissioned by the Lord Jesus Himself as an Apostle...even though he had all of the education and credentials necessary for success, he was never a “solo saint” or a “Lone Ranger Christian” who tried to “go it alone.” Paul did not believe in *Apostolic aloneness* or *Apostolic aloofness* – like many Christian leaders have succumbed to today. He wanted to live a life of accountability. As a result, soon after his conversion he took a trip to Jerusalem to be “checked out” by the other more senior Apostles who were “in the Lord” before he was. And it was obviously the Lord who prompted him to do this. Note his description of these visits in part of his autobiography:

“I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw...James, the Lord’s brother...Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to *revelation* and *set before them* the Gospel I preached to the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be *leaders*, for fear I was *running* or had *run my race in vain*” (Gal. 1:18-19 2:2).

There’s the testimony of a man who was truly accountable. Not once, but twice, he went up to Jerusalem to meet with

the other Apostles and respected church leaders to make sure he was “running the right race” in his evangelism among the Gentiles. So Paul started out his Christian ministry concerned that he was not “...running in vain” by either running in the wrong direction or running the wrong race altogether. And as we will see later, he ended up victorious at the finish line because he was a man who *preached* and *practiced* accountability to the end.

Sadly, you and I are living in a time when the “stars are falling down!” Not the ones in the galaxy – but the ones in the public arenas of life. There has never been a time when more “super stars” have fallen in every walk of life. Almost daily there are breaking news accounts of athletic stars...rock stars...political stars...financial stars...religious stars – who have fallen from *fame* to *shame*. They have gone from being *hero* to *zero* overnight! And the common stumbling block for each of them was the fact they were not really accountable to anyone for anything.

The sad sagas of their fall from stardom echoes what was said of King Saul when he died in ignominious defeat on the battle field because of the sin and prideful presumption that had invaded his life: “*How the mighty have fallen!*” (II Sam. 1:19). Indeed!

It seems that the higher people climb on the ladder of success, the less accountable they become to anyone. There is no higher moral authority in their lives than their own inflated ego and pride. The moral compass in

their heart is frozen on self. So, without the checks-and-balances of authentic accountability, they become vulnerable and susceptible to the illusion of invincibility. Their conscience becomes insensitive to any voice but their own. The public spotlight and the applause of the crowd drive them ever onward and upward. They become addicted to attention. The amount of press coverage or media attention is the all important issue. Soon they feel they can do no wrong. They become their own highest moral authority. What is good for them and their career is the single standard of the rightness or wrongness of any decision or course of action.

Pause for a moment and ponder some of the repeated Biblical warnings against pride:

- “When pride comes, then comes *disgrace*” (Prov. 11:2).
- “Pride goes before *destruction*, a haughty spirit before a *fall*” (Prov. 16:18).
- “Before his *downfall* a man’s heart is proud” (Prov. 18:12).
- “A man’s pride brings him *low*” (Prov. 29:23).
- “Those who walk in pride, He is able to *humble*” (Dan. 4:37).
- “Whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart, him will I not *endure*” (Ps. 101:5; Prov. 21:4).
- “The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go *unpunished*” (Prov. 16:5).

- “The Lord Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted and they will be *humbled*” (Isa. 2:12).

Carefully note the graphic words associated with pride in these verses: *downfall, disgrace, brought low, not endure, punished, humbled and destruction*. Those are not very complimentary epitaphs to have carved on your tombstone!

Since pride is the opposite of humility, God says “I hate pride and arrogance” (Prov. 8:13). Proud people do not “...*walk humbly* with their God” (Micah 6:8). They walk in haughtiness and arrogance. So they invite God’s judgment to humble them. As both Peter and James wrote: “God *opposes the proud* but *gives grace to the humble*” (1 Pet. 5:5; Ja. 4:6).

The Psalmist summarized the relational results of pride this way: “Though the Lord is on high, He looks upon the lowly, but the proud He knows from afar” (Ps. 138:6). So *it is impossible to have intimacy with God while motivated by a proud and haughty spirit*. It is only those who are truly humble who will know intimacy with God because they will be continuously awed with His majesty and worthiness and overwhelmed by His unmerited love and “Amazing Grace!”

Having an authentic accountability team-mate, then, is one of the best and most practical safe-guards from falling privately or publicly. That’s because no person every *falls publicly* who has not already *fallen privately*. They were

just not caught yet. Remember this inviolate principle: *“No one falls suddenly.”* Every fall is a millimeter or centimeter at a time. Falling is one series of inch-by-inch small compromises and concessions one after another – all starting in the mind before they are expressed in the body. And a good accountability partner can help guard you against these subtle downward pulls of the flesh.

Sadly, our world has increasingly divorced “private morality” from “public performance.” Whether a person is an athlete or politician, we are told that a person’s private life is their own personal business. What they do behind closed doors should have no affect upon their public performance or professional persona. But that mentality is a total illusion in a moral universe created and sustained by a Holy God. Because of His love, mercy and grace, God may let you get away with some “secret sin” for a while – especially if you are “living in ignorance” in that area of your life (Acts 17:30). But, if you know the truth in that area and ignore it, in time He will expose you in one way or the other. That’s why the Bible warns “...be *sure* your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23).

You see, God will never allow sin to successfully “hide out” in His universe or in your life without ultimately exposing it. That’s because He knows that sin will keep us from becoming the person He created us to be. He knows sin will keep us from running the race...hitting the mark...crossing the finishing line...winning the game. God knows that sin will ultimately “bench us” for time and



eternity. So His love, mercy and grace will not allow Him to forever ignore our sin. One way or the other, He will make sure it comes to light.

Because of God's unrelenting love, He will continually bring people and circumstances into our lives as little cautions...promptings...rebukes...corrections – moral caution lights to get us back on the “path of righteousness for His Name sake” (Ps. 23:3). And we continuously ignore those moral caution lights at our own peril. As Proverbs wisely warns: “A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be broken *beyond remedy*” (29:1). That's a scary place to end up – on the garbage heap of history! And eternally that place is known as *hell!*

Only true accountability, then, will keep the two extremes of *pride* on the one hand and *defeat* on the other, from dominating and destroying your game. Therefore, when you *run in accountability*, you will also...



**RUN WITH HOPE**

The bottom line is this: *When we lose hope, we lose.* Hope is like air in our lungs – you just can't live without it. Without hope, we soon *give up* and *give in*. Or as the wise man of Proverbs described it: "Hope deferred makes the heart *sick*" (Prov. 13:12). And what the Bible calls "heart sickness" is what psychiatrists and psychologists call *depression*. Obviously depressed athletes do not win – they lose.

It goes without saying, then, that an athlete cannot "run to win" if he or she has lost hope. They will not give it their "best shot" when they are *depressed*. When they give in to *negativity* and a *defeatist attitude*, the game is over for them. The season has ended.

How many times we have all witnessed this happen to an athlete or a team in the mist of competition. Suddenly there is a stumble...a bad play...an untimely foul...an unfair call...a crucial missed shot...a key player injured – and quickly a sense of hopelessness spreads through the team. Their confidence instantaneously drains away...their

faces become somber...their heads drop... their faces are buried in a towel...their bodies become limp...they lose all hope of winning – they “hit the wall.” They are like deflated balloons. *Hope* has left them.

When an athlete or team hits this low, their only *hope* is for someone to step in and give them *fresh hope*. Someone who will cause them to “shake off” their losing attitude...refocus their vision...renew their strength...inflare their passion...lift up their heads...reenergize them...cause them to reach deep... help them get their “second wind” – recharge them for a “come-back!”

That’s exactly what the Holy Spirit does as we go to the Bible and re-focus our hearts and minds on the “God of hope” (Rom. 15:13). That’s why the prophet of old could confidently say:

“Those who *hope in the Lord* will *renew their strength*. They will *soar* on the wings of eagles; they will *run* and not grow weary; they will *walk* and not faint” (Isa. 40:31).

Note the results of this “second wind” that the Holy Spirit gives as a result of *hoping in the Lord*. The weary spiritual athletes “...*renew their strength*.” And as a result of this “second wind”, they “...walk...run...soar!” That’s what Biblical *hope* brings.

So, God's Training Manual, the Bible, is a "Book of Hope." That's because it is the revelation of the "God of all hope." No less than 73 times in the Old Testament alone, God is portrayed as our only source of hope. It is one of the prominent themes in both Testaments. Hope is spoken about over 95 times in the Old Testament, and 85 times in the New Testament. That's a lot of hope!

And in the Bible hope is not at all the vague, nebulous, ethereal, "if" word that it is associated with in the English language. The Hebrew word means: "*To long after, to stretch out towards.*" So, the people in Old Testament times were "longing for...reaching for...stretching-out towards" the coming of the Messiah – like a runner stretching-out for the finish line.

New Testament hope looks in two directions. It first *looks back* at Christ's death and resurrection as the basis for our *past hope*. It then *looks forward* to His second coming as the certainty of our *future hope*. Therefore, there is no doubt...no vagueness...no ambiguity...no uncertainty whatsoever in the New Testament word for hope. It means: "*A confident expectation; an unconditional certainty.*"

Think about that for a minute. What a difference it would make for an athlete or a team to go out on the track or field knowing with "unconditional certainty" that they were going to win the game. Talk about being "psyched up!" Talk about being positive! Talk about playing with confidence! That's what true Biblical hope gives you.

You see, I have read the last chapter – so I already know who wins and who loses. As a result, the Holy Spirit gives me *hope...confidence...assurance* – a *winning attitude* regardless of the current circumstances.

Let me close this point with one of my most favorite benedictions in the New Testament. Perhaps it will be a refreshing and reenergizing word of hope for you:

“May the *God of hope* fill you with all *joy and peace* as you trust in Him, so that you may *overflow with hope* by the power of the *Holy Spirit*” (Rom. 13:15).

Now that you have your “second wind” from the “God of hope,” you can also...

**RUN WITH PERSEVERANCE**

Without a doubt, *perseverance* is one of the key ingredients that makes the difference between *winner*s and *loser*s. Simply put, *winner*s *persevere* and continue – while *loser* *pain-out* and give up. Perseverance is especially necessary for *living* and *running*. That's because the Christian race is not a *100 meter sprint* – but a *life-long marathon*.

Many believers forget to read about this *running principle* in their Christian Training Manual. Or they never had an older and wiser spiritual coach to *disciple* and *mentor* them in this area. So, when the starting gun fires, they “shoot out” of the starting blocks like a house-on-fire! But many of them burn-out just as quickly. They soon “run out of steam” and “crash and burn” in their tracks. So many new and young Christian athletes *start strong* – but often do not *finish strong* – if at all. And it all has to do with *pacing* and *perseverance*.

Every long-distance runner usually “hits a wall” at the furthest point of his or her endurance. Marathon runners and triathlon athletes often refer to this place of torment as

the “pain barrier.” It is the “lid” on how far or how high they can go. It seems to be the very outer limits of their endurance. At that point, their muscles cramp-up. Their lungs seem like they are splitting as they grasp for more air. Their heart is almost pounding out of their chest. Their mind gets foggy. That’s the point where their body screams out *stop! Enough! Quit! Go no further! Rest!*

Many runners do stop at that point. That becomes the psychological and physiological end-point of their endurance. They condition their *mind* and *body* to the fact that this point is *the limit...the end...the stopping point*. And every time they reach that point, both their mind and body *shut down* and *turn off*.

Others runners, however, “break the pain barrier” and extend the borders of their running ability. Through *pain* and *persistence*, they keep extending their running limits to more and more distant points. They well understand from personal experience the athletic maxim: “No pain, no gain.” Many of them speak of a new burst of adrenalin that often comes after they break their pain barrier. It results in a “runner’s high!” A state of mental and physical *euphoria* in which they feel they can *run forever!* Personally, I have never reached that point, but I have some running friends who speak of it!

It is often the *prodding* and *persistence* of some coach, mentor or running mate who urges them on when they feel they can go no further. This relates to one of our



previous *running principles* about the importance of *running in accountability*. That means running with other runners who will not let you stop when you want to. Runners who will push you past your limits. Longer distant runners who will *provoke you to persevere*. Runners whose footprints are out in front of you, urging you onward and upward. Champion runners who will make you “go the distance.”

The writer of Hebrews reminds us of this running principle. He first of all takes us on a walk through the spiritual athletic “Hall of Fame.” He points out these “Champions of Faith” who went the distance. Spiritual athletes like Abel . . . Enoch . . . Noah . . . Abraham . . . Joseph . . . Moses . . . Gideon . . . Sampson . . . David – and many others that he does not call by name. He then reminds us that these victorious spiritual athletes are now “cheering us on from the *grandstands of glory!*”

But most of all, he exhorts us to *focus on Jesus*, as we will see in more detail through our last *running principle*. So for now, let’s listen to the cheers and counsel of those winning spiritual athletes who ran their race by faith long before you and I showed up at the arena and took our place on the starting blocks.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great *cloud of witnesses*, let us *throw off everything that hinders and every sin that easily entangles*, and let us *run with perseverance the race marked*

*out before us.* Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith..." (Heb. 12:1-2).

Those winning spiritual athletes who compose that "...great cloud of witnesses," were by no means perfect. Even though we Christians today tend to put them in the category of "spiritual super stars" – they were people just like you and me. They were molded out of the same frail human clay from which you and I are made. Like each of us, they were an admixture of "dust and divinity." They all "had feet of clay." Some started their race poorly. Some started late in the game. Others took costly detours on their spiritual marathon. Some even stumbled badly. All of them had some kind of "excess baggage" that slowed them down. Each one had their own sins that "entangled" them.

And each one of those spiritual athletes had their own unique "...race marked out before them." No two races or race-tracks were the same. Each was an individualized course sovereignty marked off by God – with their name on it. But in spite of their problems . . . oppositions . . . failures . . . set-backs . . . defeats . . . disappointments, each" . . . ran with *perseverance*" the *race of faith* that God set out before them. By faith and perseverance each crossed the finish line. Few of them did so without some bruises and blood stains, but each "...finished the course set out before them."

And, my fellow Christian athlete – you can do the same. To do so, you must especially listen to one of those

spiritual champions in that “. . . great cloud of witnesses.” We have already heard wise words of coaching by him in this study. But having come out of a background of religious legalism himself, Paul especially exhorts us that we must...



**RUN WITH GRACE**

One of the most common mistakes of young spiritual athletes is to become entangled in *law*. That's because other immature Christians or unwise spiritual leaders often begin to "coach them in legalism." After being freed by Christ through salvation, these well-intending legalists bind these new Christians with *rules* and *regulations*. Believing they are *helping* the new convert, they are in reality *hurting* him. By schooling them in *laws* and *legalisms*, they think they are making them *strong* as Christian athletes – when in reality they are *weakening them*. They are setting them up for disillusionment and defeat rather than freedom and maturity.

This is not a new spiritual phenomenon. Every where the Apostle Paul went preaching the "Gospel of Grace," the Jewish legalists followed him – preaching their "Religion of Law." They came with the religious "traditions of the elders." They followed Paul with their circumcision knives...their robes and phylacteries... their "smells and bells"...their kosher foods...their theological branding irons. They had their little Jewish religious box that they wanted to put

every Gentile Christian into. They assured these new converts that the only place for true religious freedom was in the narrow confines of their little theological box. They literally “switched the price tags” and “exchanged law for grace.” They called bondage freedom and freedom bondage. And in their spiritual immaturity, the young Christians at Galatia didn’t know the difference.

Author Tim Stafford rightly summarized the mind-set of this kind of legalistic Christians as people of “...ardent narrowness who have a fortress mentality and an angry clasp on truth.” That means that these passionate legalists usually come across with a rigid and intimidating “all-knowingness” when it comes to spiritual things. And these “fighting fundamentalists” are always very forceful and fierce in the propagation of their legalistic faith. They are generally very zealous and evangelistic in their desire to win converts to their legalistic position. But listen to what Jesus said about them:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! *You travel over land and sea to win a single convert*, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (Matt. 23:15).

Coming from our Master Coach, those are pretty severe words of warning indeed! Who wants to be a “son of hell” like the Pharisees?! Every young spiritual athlete should indeed stay away from this legalistic brand of Christianity

that will bind them in rules and regulations down to every finite detail of their lives. And in the process they will never learn how to “walk in the Spirit” to the degrees that they will not “gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (Gal. 5:16).

Is it any wonder then that Coach Paul took similar action to liberate the young spiritual athletes in Galatia. As their coach, Paul had to severely exhort them and verbally discipline them for being diverted by *legalism*. He takes his Galatian Church Team into the locker room for a rather severe half-time pep talk! Let’s listen in on one of the most strongly worded exhortations in the entire New Testament. As you read these words, you can almost hear the intensity in his voice and see the veins popping out on Coach Paul’s neck as he practically yells at them! You can see the fire in his eyes over the fact that his church team is about to be *bound and benched by legalism!* Unlike all of his other coaching sessions in the New Testament, this one does not begin with a single word of praise and encouragement. He just blasts them with these words...

“I am *astonished* that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the *grace of Christ* and are turning to a *different Gospel*...Evidently, some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to *pervert the Gospel of Christ*. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a Gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be *eternally condemned!*”

After reminding them of his own personal testimony of *deliverance from legalism and performance-based religion* as a Pharisee, he continues to strongly exhort them. He again seeks to refocus them on the supremacy of the Lord Jesus and His freeing grace:

*“You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?”*

Paul then gives his final coup de grace with these decisive words:

*“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery...You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of perversion does not come from the One who calls you. A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be...You my brothers, were called to be free” (Gal. 5:1, 7-10, 13).*



As we saw earlier, there is certainly a place for *law* – but never divorced from *love*. Young spiritual athletes obviously need to “learn the rules of the game” so they can one day become winners. They must be taught that a “game without rules” is *chaos*. It’s *athletic anarchy*. But a game that is always dominated by the rules is “Little League Christianity.” It is for the beginner...the children...the immature...the neophyte...the “baby Christian.” But in the spiritual “Big Leagues,” they *play for the sheer love of the game!* They have long since passed the “basic fundamentals” of law. The “rules and regulations” of the game are now second-nature to the professional players. They now play subconsciously “according the rules” rather than consciously “against the rules.”

Therefore, carefully listen to Paul’s comparison between *law*, that is based upon *performance*, and *grace*, that is based upon *faith*:

“Before this faith came, we were held *prisoner by the law*, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be *justified by faith*. *Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law*. You are all sons of God *through faith* in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:23-25).

I really like how the New Living Translation renders this:

*“The Law was our guardian and teacher to lead us until Christ came. So now, through faith in Christ, we are made right with God. But now that faith in Christ has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian. So you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”*

So, *law* does have its place – especially in the lives of young spiritual athletes. The same principle of parenting applies in raising young child. They need to know where the boundaries are. It is what I call “freedom within fences...liberty within boundaries” The child needs the security of some fixed guard rails to live within. After all, they were incubated for 9 months in the narrow confines of their mother’s womb. That’s pretty tight quarters – but it was secure!

When they are new born infants, their “secure zone” is not much bigger than their bassinet or play pen. Later it is expanded to the borders of their little room. Still later the whole house is opened up to them. When they are a bit older yet, it includes the whole back yard. And as they grow, those known and fixed boundaries give the child physical and emotional security.

Many psychological studies have proven that constantly shifting boundaries and parameters only result in insecurity, fear and anger. But prolonged dependency

upon *rules, regulations and legalism* can also stunt a child's mental and emotional growth. That's why as a child grows, his and her boundaries must be gradually broadened. Then they will be less and less regulated by the *external fences* of rules and regulations because they have *internal fences* that have been firmly erected in their hearts. They will then be constrained by an inner "law of love" rather than an external "law of fear."

The same is true of a young spiritual athlete. A constant consciousness of rules and regulations will only take away their *joy* of the game. And that will only result in their ultimate *bondage* and *defeat*. They will finally quit playing the game altogether. They will become losers long before they even begin to play the game with freedom and joy.

Therefore, religious legalism does not give us victory – only faith in Christ does. So, Paul called his Galatian Church Team back to the *basic fundamentals of the faith*. He called them back to the primacy of their *freedom* in Christ:

"What has happened to all your joy?...Those people (the religious legalists) are zealous to win you over, but for no good...My dear *children* for whom I am again in *the pains of childbirth* until *Christ is formed in you*" (Gal. 4:15-19).

Like a wise spiritual coach, Paul pointed out that *legalism* had stunted their spiritual growth. It had retarded them as

*spiritual children* rather than molding them into mature spiritual athletes. As a result, he once again found himself in the "...pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in them." It was almost like taking them back to the starting blocks of conversion. For Paul, weaning them away from *legalism* was almost like having to see them "born again" – all over again! And while that was spiritually impossible, Paul definitely had to take them "back to the basics" of Christian living.

Therefore, a mature winning athlete soon *forgets* about the "rules and regulations" of the game. He has long since mastered the *basic fundamentals*. He does not have to keep repeating the rules and regulations in his mind over and over again while he is playing the game. They have become second nature to him. These *basic fundamentals* of the game are now such an integral part of his athletic DNA that they have become almost subconscious to him. As a result, he does not run *against the laws* of the game; he runs *within the laws* of the game. He is now free to *love the game*... "go-with-the-flow"... be spontaneous... take a "new direction" at a moment's notice as the dynamics of the game demands. Only then does he really begin to *enjoy* the game. And that's when the *freedom* and *fun* starts. That's when an athlete really begins to *enjoy the game* and *love the competition*.

*Legalism*, then, is much like steroids, human growth hormone (HGH) and performance enhancing drugs. They may seem to work for a while and enhance your

performance as an athlete. While studies show that they do give temporary extra muscle mass, there is not much lasting increase in actual brood strength. While it helps the athlete's body get "pumped up," it is more from retention of fluids than actual muscle. And analysis increasingly proves that these athletes are more prone in the long run to develop joint pain, lose endurance and maintain higher levels of lactate which ultimately fatigues muscles. So, the perceived positive effects of steroids and performance enhancing drugs are short-lived. They are a short-cut. A quick solution. A perceived edge over the competition. But in the long run, those drugs become health-threatening and oftentimes result in a premature death. Ultimately, performance enhancing drugs may seem to help an athlete "win the event." But it is really an illusion. A hoax. A sham. It is not authentic athletics. There is no real lasting enhancement of ability as an athlete. In the end they are disqualified and dishonored as a champion athlete all together.

It is the same with religious law – even down to the minutest letter. Legalism and obedience to the law may seem to "enhance your spiritual growth." But it does not. Growth through the law is impossible. It's an illusion. That's why Paul said that while the "...*letter kills...*the *Spirit gives life*" (II Cor. 3:6; Jn. 6:63). So law always "kills" your relationship with Christ. It replaces God's free grace with your own performance in the flesh. And no amount of "legalistic enhancing rules and regulations" can give you

freedom in Christ. That's a free gift of God's "Amazing Grace" through His Holy Spirit.

Therefore, it is only *grace* that makes you a *winner*. It is only "faith in Christ" that brings you *spiritual freedom* and *victory* in the race of life. And once you truly learn how to consistently *run in grace*, you will also learn to...

**RUN WITH JOY**

When an athlete gets beyond the basic fundamentals; when he or she has so mastered the “rules of engagement” that they are second nature to them; when they no longer have to consciously focus on the “rules and regulations” that govern the event – that’s when they really begin to love the game. That’s when they really enjoy the competition. Then and only then are they ready to *run with joy!*

As we saw above, the Church Team in Galatia that Paul had recruited and organized had unfortunately fallen under the *legalistic coaching* of another trainer after he had left town. Just when they were beginning to really enjoy the “freedom of the game,” these Judaizers came in and tried to slow them down with a bunch of religious “*rules and regulations.*” Up to that point they were “...running a good race.” Through *faith* they had been “running with Jesus” with all their hearts – enjoying *grace* every step of the way. They were progressing as spiritual athletes in the game of life. But, then, like an unscrupulous runner, the legalists “...cut in on them” (Gal. 5:7). They detoured them. They

diverted their attention. They got them off track. They caused these Christian athletes to lose focus on the singular goal of Jesus Christ.

Convinced that they were helping them, these legalists really slowed down the running pace of the Galatian athletes. They caused them to *lose focus* on Jesus – which caused them to slow down and stumble in their spiritual race. This *legalistic diversion* almost took them out of the race altogether. As a result, this 1st century Church Team *lost their joy* because they *lost their focus on Jesus*.

Through the years I have known many Christians who made the same well-intentioned mistake – some of whom are still slavishly running that kind of *legalistic race* to this very day. Day after day, week after week, month after month, they legalistically “go through the motions” of church-anity and religiosity – but don’t enjoy much or any of it. It is just the “thing to do.” As a result, they live a *joyless* Christianity.

But as the Galatian Team fell back into this religious legalism, they became bound by the joylessness of *performance-based Christianity* – which is artificial *spirituality*. It is the kind of *works-oriented-religion* that keeps Christians on the spiritual treadmill of “doing ... doing ... doing” – ever faster, harder, higher and holier!

The official Olympic motto is: “*Swifter, higher, stronger.*” That’s a good motto – except when it comes to legalistic



Christianity that is lived out in the energies of the *flesh*. These kinds of well-intentioned legalistic Christians are generating a lot of activity, but they never go anywhere in their relationship with Jesus. That's because *rules, regulations and rituals* have replaced the primacy of *relationship*. Once such group of legalistic Christians were described this way: "They were fastidiously faultless, icily regular and splendidly dull!" That's not the kind of Christianity that is satisfying to you – or appealing to the watching world!

This kind of carnal Christian is like the young immature athlete who has gotten so preoccupied with learning the "rules of the game" that he has lost all contact with his coach. He always carries around in his jersey or athletic shorts his "rule book" – memorizing every minute detail of the law. And somewhere in the process he loses contact with his coach and teammates altogether. As a result, this carnal spiritual athlete slavishly "sweats it out" on the treadmill of "good works." As their *religious activity increases*, their *joy decreases*. Soon it is gone all together. No amount of Bible study, prayer or church attendance brings joy – only more guilt and condemnation. After a few months or years of this slavish spiritual living, most become so weary and worn out by that kind of performance-based spirituality that they get off the religious treadmill in disillusionment and defeat.

Since Paul understood the dangers of legalism from his own personal experience in Judaism as a self-righteous

Pharisee, he sought to re-train and re-liberate the Galatian Christians. As we saw earlier, he called them off the playing field and took them back into the locker room for a half-time pep talk. With chalk in hand, he went to the board to show them where they went wrong – and how to get back into the race. He again contrasted the difference between *law* and *grace* to them. He showed them that it was their *faith* in Christ's grace that saved them – not their observance of the law. And through this “grace coaching,” Paul tried to restore their *joy* by loosing them from the legalism with all of its “dos and don'ts” in which the Judaizers had bound them.

There is a beautiful athletic metaphor in the Psalms that demonstrates this principle of *running in joy*. The Psalmist looked at the sun running its course across the heavens and likened it to an athlete running his race. He began by proclaiming, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the works of His hands.” Then, he painted two word pictures about the sun:

“In the heavens He has pitched a tent for the sun,  
which is like a *bridegroom* coming forth from his  
pavilion, like a *champion rejoicing to run his course*”  
(Ps. 19: 1, 5).

Notice that the Psalmist said that the sun is like a “...*champion rejoicing to run his course*.” No true champion *grudgingly* runs his course. They do not run *out of duty* – they *run out of delight!* It is because they *love the*

*game that they run with joy.* It is their sheer *enjoyment of the game* that keeps a true champion coming back to the competition again and again. The *joy* is the “*adrenaline rush*” that gives them their athletic high! And it is also their *joy that energizes them and empowers them.* That great truth is succinctly summarized in Psalm 118:24: “The joy of the Lord is my strength.” *Joy* does give *strength* – both *physical strength* and *spiritual strength.*

One of the greatest examples I know of about *running in joy* is the story of Eric Liddell. From his childhood in Scotland he was “swift of foot.” As he grew up, he enjoyed running races more and more – and continuously excelled. As an adult he gained the reputation as the “Flying Scotsman.”

Liddell ultimately won a place on his country’s team for the 1924 Olympics in Paris. He was almost a guarantee for the gold in the 100 meter race. He had won all of his qualifying heats. However, the finals of that competition were slated for Sunday. As a devoted Christian, that was Eric Liddell’s Sabbath. Much to everyone’s horror, he said: I’m not running.” And he didn’t. He went to church instead of to the Olympic stadium on that Sunday. All of England was aghast and disappointed. They had little understanding or tolerance for what they perceived as religious fanaticism. They felt their champion had let them down. They felt betrayed. But in spite of the urging of British Royalty, Liddell stuck to his convictions. He did not run. He

forfeited the gold medal for his country that he would obviously have won.

But even though Liddell was a devoted Christian, he was also a devoted runner. So, he entered the 400 meter which he was not trained for. The field of runners was formidable and well trained. There seemed to be no possibility for him to win. But to everyone's total amazement, Liddell did win – by an amazing 15 meters! How could he do that? It was his sheer *joy in running!*

Eric Liddell's story was portrayed in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. A biography was also written on him entitled *God's Joyful Runner*. And one of the most memorial lines is when he is talking to his sister about finishing the Olympics before leaving for China as a missionary. She felt he was compromising spiritual principles for worldly pleasure. Liddell's response is immortal. He said: "*God made me fast and when I run I feel His pleasure!*"

So, my athletic Christian friend, when you are *running for Jesus* you cannot help but *run with joy*. You cannot help but sense God's *pleasure* when you are fully flexing and expressing the natural talents and spiritual gifts He graced you with. When the joy is gone the race is over. It's that simple. But while the pleasure endures, the race continues – with passion! That's why I have always loved the "pleasure principle" expressed by John Piper: "*Pleasure is the measure of your treasure.*"

Get in touch with what really brings you *pleasure*. God has written that in your spiritual and emotional DNA. It is His internal radar to guide you to the specific race that He has laid out for you. Once you have found it, run it with all your might! Run it with *passion* and *pleasure!* And you will “win the gold!” It was the sheer *joy or running* that enabled Eric Liddell to win the gold medal in the 400 meters against all odds. And it was also *joy* that kept Jesus running faithfully until He had *finished the course* His father had set out before Him. It will be the same for us. That’s why, in finality, we must...



**RUN WITH JESUS**

Listen afresh to these very familiar words about how Jesus ran His race – and how we should run ours:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...let us *run with perseverance the race marked out for us*. Let us *fix our eyes on Jesus*, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the *joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame*, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. *Consider Him* who endured such *opposition* from sinful men, *so that you will not grow weary and lose heart*” (Heb. 12:1-3).

Jesus was the perfect Incarnation of a victorious athlete. He was *God’s Champion* – the *Messiah* – sent to this world to run and finish the race we could never win. None of us were even qualified to enter the race. And even though His 3 year-long marathon race took Him to the cross, with all of its *pain and shame*, He did not deviate from the goal. He *literally ran Himself to death* through obedience to His Father.

As Jesus was running His race, He had to "...endure the opposition of sinful men." They used every device and deceit possible to sabotage His race. Both the religious and political leader conspired against Him. They did everything they could to turn popular opinion against Him. When nothing else worked, they "took Him out!" They killed him. And in the end, the pain of His race was so great that it literally *ruptured His heart* as He "...endure the cross" for you and me!

*How* did he do it? *Why* would He do it? What caused Him to literally *run Himself to death* for you and me? One word. *Love!* You see, Jesus knew what was on the *other side* of the cross. He knew His death would not be the end of His race – but a *new beginning*. Even though it was Friday, He knew that "...*Sunday was coming!*" He knew that death would not have the final word. Neither would the Romans or Jews. He knew that there would be a resurrection that would usher in a new day...a new era...a new team...a new race – a certain victory! That was the "...*joy that was set before Him*" that caused Him to "...endure the cross" and "scorn the shame."

The cross was the essence of both *pain* and *shame*. As I said earlier, every athlete worth his name knows the principle: "*No pain, no gain!*" There is just no such thing as success in athletics without some significant pain. For most good athletes it becomes a life-style. They constantly live with the pain of pushing themselves beyond normal



limits. They constantly live with the pain of injuries. But they do so because of their sheer love of the game! “*No guts, no glory!*”

It is because Jesus endured the “gory of the cross” that He experienced the “glory of the resurrection.” Is it any wonder, then, why the Training Manual calls Him the “...*author* and *perfecter* of our faith?” The word here that the writher uses for “author” is *archegon*. It variously means: *originator, founder pioneer, and leader*. This same word is used in Hebrews 2:10 to describe Christ as our “Suffering Champion”:

“In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God...should make the *author* of their salvation perfect through *suffering*.”

At this point I love the Authorized Version’s rendering. It refers to Christ as the “...*Captain* of their salvation.” So, because Jesus *pioneered, persevered* and *perfected* our “race of faith,” He alone qualifies to be the “Captain of the team.” Since He has already faced and defeated our greatest competitors of sin, death and the grave, He is our *Champion...our Captain...our Coach* – our *all!*

Fellow Christian athlete, keep your “...eyes *fixed* on Jesus.” Don’t just occasionally *glance* at Him – steadfastly *gaze* upon Him as you run your race. If you will do so, I can assure you that you will one day “cross the finish line” in *victory*. And until that time, you will be able to *run in the*

*liberty of love* – “For it is for *freedom* that Christ has set you free” (Gal. 5:1).

Beloved runner, stay the course. *Run by faith* the race that has been sovereignly set out before you. And do so, not by the frail *energies of the flesh* that will fail you; or by the “rules and regulations” of *legalism* that will bind you – but run with the *power of the Holy Spirit* that will sustain you to the end. As you keep both the *goal* and *gold* in mind – the Lord Jesus – you will ultimately reach the *winner’s platform!* All of us faithful Christians will receive the *gold* for our “Victory in Jesus!”

With these “10 Principles of Running” in mind, I want us to conclude this study by going to the ultimate “Eternal Winner’s Circle.” There we will meet the final Judge of the Games, God Himself. And there He will hand out the *eternal rewards* for how each of us ran our leg of this marathon called the “race of life.”



### THE AWARD CEREMONY

Certainly one of the high points of every Olympic event is the official Award Ceremony when the *gold, silver* and *bronze medals* are given out. This is the magical moment that every Olympic athlete dreams about. It is what they train for all of their lives. To stand on the platform representing their country...to hear their national anthem played while their country flag is hoisted...to have the judge hang the Olympic medal they have won around their necks. For a world class athlete, it doesn't get any better than that!

But the vast majority of humanity will only be observers of the Olympics. They will never compete in an event or win a medal. They will never know either the "thrill of victory" or the "agony of defeat" in an Olympic competition. But knowingly or unknowingly, they are running another life-long marathon. And it too will end in an Award Ceremony. Let me tell you about it straight from the Bible...

You see, God's Word is absolutely clear that there is coming a time when you too will receive your *reward*. But at this Award Ceremony, no human eyes or instruments will make the determination between winners and losers. No fallible or prejudiced panel of judges will make the discernment and decisions. No Olympic judge will give out the medals. The Judge will be none other than Jesus Himself. As God's ultimate Champion, He alone is qualified to judge everyone who has ever lived.

Jesus clearly told His disciples that "...the Father judges no one, but has entrusted *all judgment to the Son*" (Jn. 5:22, 27). He is qualified to be the final judge because He won His triathlon with grace and perfection. So, He judges as one who has already *run* and won. And His judgments will be perfect. There will be no questions...no partiality...no debate...no contention...no discussion...no recourse...no second opinions.

The converted atheist and Oxford Scholar, C.S. Lewis, wrote this about the searing accuracy of Christ's judgment:

"It will be infallible judgment. If it is favorable we shall have no fear; if unfavorable, no hope that it is wrong. We shall not only believe, we shall know – know beyond doubt in every fiber of our appalled or delighted being – that as the Judge has said, so we are: neither more nor less nor other" (*The World's Last Night*, p. 113).

This final Award Ceremony is called the Judgment Seat of Christ. At that judgment, everyone in the universe will know that Christ's discernment about them has been perfect and His judgments eternally accurate. And as a result of those individual judgments, the Lord Jesus Himself will personally hand out the rewards with His nail scarred hands. And every award will be absolutely appropriate for each individual winner in life's Olympics.

Also, this Award Ceremony will not be on earth – but in heaven. So, let me share the verses that will introduce this final Award Ceremony of human history from two passages of Scripture. Both are found in Paul's coaching letters known as I & II Corinthians.

Before Paul introduced this coming judgment, he reminded his fellow Christian athletes to "...fix your eyes not on what is *seen*, but on what is *unseen*. For what is seen is *temporary*, but what is unseen is *eternal*" (II Cor. 4:18). He goes on to remind them that life on this earth is in reality "away" and heaven is really "at home." That's because to be "in heaven" is to be "...with the Lord." And where the Lord is – is *home*.

With that clarification in mind, Coach Paul reminded his fellow spiritual athletes what the ultimate *goal* of the game of life was. "So we make it our *goal*," he wrote, "to *please Him*, whether we are at home in the body or away from it." Why do we make that our all-consuming goal? Because

the Eternal Award Ceremony is coming. Listen to Paul's brief description of it:

“For we must all appear before the *Judgment Seat of Christ* that *each one* will receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (II Cor. 5:10).

The word that Paul used here for the “Judgment Seat of Christ” is the *bema*. It was a raised seat on a platform where the Olympic judge sat to pronounce the winner of an event and award the prizes. I have been to ancient Corinth several times where I have personally seen this exact “bema seat” that Paul was writing about. It still exists to this day from the ancient Olympic days, where judgments were made and rewards were given out.

It is also important to note here that this is not a *judicial seat* in the legal sense of the word. This was not the kind of “Legal Bench” that a judge sat on in a court of law to try a condemned criminal. It is not the “Judge’s Seat” from which the verdict is given to send a condemned prisoner off to do “hard time” or to execution. That’s another whole judgment that the Bible clearly warns about – called the “Great White Throne Judgment.” There the issues are literally “life and death.” But, here at the *bema*, the issues are “winning and losing” – with the resulting rewards or loss thereof.

Since this judgment is an eternal reality, let's look at what *God's Award Ceremony* will be like. The Bible gives us many clear details about this *bema* judgment. First, it tells us that it will be a time of...







## PERSONALIZATION

The Apostle Paul reminds us that “...we must *all* appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ that *each one* may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (II Cor. 5:10). From this verse it is clear that we will not appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ in a group. It will not be in mass. We will not come as a team. We will not come in a throng of humanity so we can hide in anonymity. No, we will each come *personally* and *individually* before the Lord Jesus. We will all go “one-on-one” with the Creator and Lord of the universe. And there will be no rush or hurry to get our individual judgment ceremony over. *After all, He has all the time in the world!*

Let me emphasize it again less you miss the point: At this judgment and award ceremony, no man, woman or child who has ever lived will escape this personal face-to-face encounter with the Master Coach. The Apostle Paul makes it very clear that “each one” will have a personal and

intimate encounter with the Lord Jesus! *Each one* of us will have to look into His face. *Each one* of us will have to lock eyes with Him. *Each one* of us will have to give a detailed account "...for the things done in the body, whether *good or bad.*"

And when it comes to His judgments and rewards, they will not be on the bell curve. Your (and my) performance will not be compared to anyone else's. The issue will not be how anyone else ran their race. There will be no discussion of others and what they may or may not have done in their heat. There will only be one issue: "*How did we run the race that He sovereignly designed for us?*" The only standard of comparison will be the Lord Jesus Himself and how He "ran Himself to death" for us. For all of us, *this will be the most revealing personal moment of our lives!* And we will live with the results of it for all eternity. The writer of Hebrews describes it this way:

*"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account"* (Heb. 4:13).

Quite frankly, the reality of this judgment should "scare the hell out of you!" And that's exactly what it is supposed to do! It's also supposed to "scare the world" out of some of us because of our illicit love affair with it. This judgment is supposed to give you that *reverential fear* of the Lord that Paul had that we will look at later. It is supposed to keep you as a believer from "living like hell on the way to

heaven!” It is to motivate you as never before to press toward the singular goal of “...pleasing Him.”

But the *bema judgment* will also be a time of...





## MANIFESTATION

In earlier verses, Paul expanded this whole matter of judgment, but here he changed the metaphors from athletics to building. He now wrote as a “master builder” rather than a “master coach.” But the parallels are unmistakable:

“By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an *expert builder*, and someone else is building on it. But *each one* should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is *Jesus Christ*. If any man builds on this foundation using *gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw*, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be *revealed with fire*, and the *fire will test the quality of each man’s work*. If what he has built survives, *he will receive his reward*. If it is *burned*

*up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames” (I Cor. 3:10-15).*

The Bible assures us, then, that it will not only be a day of *personalization*, it will also be a day of *manifestation*. Paul first of all reminds these spiritual athletes that he was the “expert builder” who laid the foundation for the church at Corinth through his evangelistic efforts. It was he who had carefully built them on the eternal foundation of Jesus Christ.

He used similar words when he wrote the spiritual athletes at Ephesus. Previously they had not even heard of Jesus. They did not know anything about the “Church League.” But now because of their faith in Christ, they were no longer “...foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” By God’s grace they had now been chosen to be on the Home Team. As a result, they were “...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with *Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone*” (Eph. 2:19-20).

Now, Paul reminded those 1st century saints to “...be careful how they build” on that sacred and secure foundation. That’s because “...the Day will *bring it to light*.” It will clearly *manifest* the quality of each person’s life.

But we might ask: “What *Day* is he talking about?” Once again, this is the “Judgment Day” that the Bible often refers

to as the “Day of Lord.” You see, right now we are living in “man’s day.” This is man’s brief hour to dominate the stage of human history. This is his inning on the playing field. This is his time in the arena. But the Bible assures us that “God’s Day” is coming! And it will be a day of *manifestation* when the sum total of all of our work will be evaluated by the Lord Jesus.

As Paul said, at the *bema* everything will be “brought to *light*.” God will turn the lights on – the searing search lights of heaven. That’s because “God is light” (I Jn. 1:5) and judges according to His illuminous nature. That’s why He sent Jesus into this dark universe as the “light of the world” (Jn. 8:12). But Jesus said:

“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but *men love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil*. Everyone who does evil *hates the light* and will not come into the light for *fear that his deeds will be exposed*. But whoever *lives by the truth comes into the light* so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God” (Jn. 3:19-21).

When you “live in the truth” you are not afraid of being “exposed to the light.” Truth and light are running mates...soul mates...companions. The *bema*, then, will be a time when everything is brought to light – and I mean *everything!* As Jesus said:

“There is nothing *concealed* that will not be *disclosed*, or *hidden* that will not be *made known*. What you have said in the *dark* will be heard in the *daylight*, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs” (Lk. 12:2-3).

Once again, the Judge will be the Lord Jesus. As Paul said: “*God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ*” (Rom. 2:16). Got any secrets you are trying to hide from Jesus? Won’t work. One day He will make every one of them known.

But, this “Day of the Lord” is also a time of...





## EVALUATION

We are told that “...the fire will *test the quality* of each man’s work” (I Cor. 3:13). Note that the emphasis here is not on “how much” but on “what kind.” As humans we tend to get caught up in *quantity* more than *quality*. But, the primary issue before God is not “how much work” – but rather “what kind of work?”

As we saw earlier: “Each one will receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether *good* or *bad*.” The two words “good” and “bad,” do not primary express a *moral* difference between things that are *righteous* and things that are *rotten*...between things that are *holy* and things that are *sinful*. The evaluation is more between what is *worthy* and what is *worthless*...between what is *frivolous* and what is *faithful*...between what will *last* and what will *perish*...between what is *temporal* and what is *eternal*.

Paul relates this to *building materials* that each of us is adding to the firm foundation of the Lord Jesus:

“If *any man* builds on this foundation using *gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is*, because the *Day* will bring it to light” (I Cor. 3:10 – 13).

It is obvious here that the primary issue is not “how much” – but “what kind?” Again, the concern is *quality* rather than *quantity*. Even more, the issue is not *what* you built from – but rather *who* you built for? As an “expert builder,” Paul names 6 kinds of building materials: “*gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay and straw.*” Three are *good* and three are *bad*. It is not hard to evaluate which ones you would want added to the foundation of your life! The first three are *worthy* building materials, while the last three are basically *worthless*. “Wood, hay and straw” have little substance to them. They are not permanent. They will not sustain you – for *time* or for *eternity!*

The crucial question then is: “What are you building with now?”

Paul further reminds us that this will be a time of...



## REVELATION

On this “Day of the Lord,” the sum total of each of our lives will be “...*revealed by fire.*” It is clear then that this will be a sobering day of *revelation*. That means that all of our works will have to pass the “fire test.”

However, each of us will not even get to that stage of judgment unless we have first personally passed our “blood test.” That means that this is *only* a judgment for people who have been “saved by the blood of Christ” (Matt. 26:28; Rom. 5:9; Eph. 1:7; 2:13; Heb. 9:12, 22; I Pet. 1:19; I Jn. 1:7; Rev. 1:5; 5:9; 19:13). You see, when you have been “saved by the blood” you need never fear “judgment by fire!”

However, those who have not been “redeemed by the blood of Christ” will face another judgment and condemnation revealed in the Bible as the “Great White Throne Judgment,” as we saw earlier. At that final

judgment, the only question is whether or not a person's name has been indelibly written in the "Book of Life" by the blood of Christ. If not, their ultimate judgment will be in the "lake of fire" (Rev. 20:11-15).

At the Great White Throne Judgment, it will not be their *works* being tested by fire – but their *lives* being cast into the eternal "lake of fire!" Certainly this is an eternal fate too awful to even contemplate! But it is one that is clearly revealed in the Bible – and most often from the lips of the Lord Jesus Himself (Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Lk. 16:23). It is sobering to realize that Jesus spoke more about the reality of hell than any other person in the entire Bible! You can "bet your life" on the trustworthiness of what he said about it! \*

But, for those who have been "saved by the blood," we only have to watch our works be "tested by fire" at the *bema*. They will not be evaluated on the basis of our race, religion, education, economics or our social standing. Each of our works will be tested and revealed by the *white hot fires of God's judgment!*

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\*(For a fuller study on this subject, please download my books on **Death, Heaven, Hell and Judgment** at [www.jwilliams.net](http://www.jwilliams.net))

Once again, God judges things according to His holy nature and standard of judgment – not ours. And because the Bible teaches that “...our God is a *consuming fire*” (Heb. 12:29), it will be a time when each of our works will be “revealed with fire” (1 Cor. 3:13). Every last one of them will have to “pass through the fires” of God’s judgment so their *quality* can be revealed.

The prophet Malachi anticipated this coming judgment with these sobering words:

“Who can endure the day of His coming?” Who can stand when He appears? For He will be like a *refiner’s fire*...He will sit as a *refiner* and *purifier of silver*...and *refine them like gold and silver*” (Mal. 3:2-3).

God used the same analogy when He spoke through the prophet Zechariah: “I will *refine them like silver* and *test them like gold*” (Zech. 13:9). So, saint, *get ready for the fires of God’s testing!* However, take heart that it is not *you* who will have to “pass through the flames” – but *your life work*. But that is still sobering enough in itself!

The “fire” of God’s judgment reveals the true nature of things. When you put “gold, silver, precious stones” into the fire, they are not destroyed. They are only further *refined* and *purified*. But when you put “wood, hay and straw” into the fire – you end up with *ashes*. And the more the “wood, hay and straw,” the *bigger our pile of ashes!*

Sadly, much of our lives will be reduced to a “heap of ashes” at the Judgment Seat of Christ. As we stand in the worthless ashes representing the sum total of our lives, many of us will be ashamed. We will suffer loss. We will live with the eternal realization that we largely wasted the only life we ever had to live here on earth playing “trivial pursuit!” We will have largely spent our lives “hurrying BIG for little reasons!”

However, the majority of humanity will not have even shown up at the Olympic Stadium. They were never even told that a cosmic competition was taking place that they were supposed to be involved in. Others who do attend will have been content to largely sit out their lives in the stands as passive pew-sitting observers – thinking that was all they were supposed to do. Still others will have run the *wrong races*. Some will win at a game that was already lost because it was the *wrong game*. They will wake up to the sad reality that they were *playing for the wrong team*. As a result, they were *eternal losers* – even if they won a few innings in time.

But, this individual judgment and revelation before God goes far beyond what we have *done*. Jesus said that we would even have to “...give account on the Day of Judgment for every *careless word* they have spoken” (Matt. 10:36). Man, that will cause you to tighten up your conversations!

God's judgment brings everything to light. And I mean *everything*. It even totally exposes the secret *motives* and hidden *motivations* of our heart. This judgment will not only reveal *what* we have done – it will also expose *why* we have done it! Now there's another sobering thought! As Paul said in a later verse about this judgment:

“He will *bring to light* what is hidden in darkness and will *expose the motives of men's hearts*. At that time each will receive his *praise* from God” (1 Cor. 4:5).

The big question then is this: “*Can my works go through the fires of God's judgment and revelation?*” Even more, how will my secret *motives* and *motivations* stand up under the perfection revelation of God's fiery judgment?

But thankfully, this judgment will also be a great day of...







## PRESERVATION

Paul makes it very clear that it is not the Christian who is being judged – but his *works*. He assures us that “...if any man’s work *survives*, he will receive his *reward*” (3:14). Then at that time “...each will receive his *praise* from God.”

The Bible is clear, then, that our *salvation is secure*. It is solely based upon our faith in what Christ did for us on the cross. So, while we may lose some of our “praise” and “reward” from God, *we will not lose our eternal salvation!* Listen carefully to Paul’s words about this:

“...the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built *survives*, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will *suffer loss*; he himself shall be *saved*, but only as one escaping through the flames” (3:15).

While we may “suffer loss” when it comes to the unworthy works of our lives, we will not lose our salvation. Paul was unmistakably clear when he said the person “...himself shall be *saved*, but only as one escaping through the flames.” The picture here is of a man who suddenly wakes up to find his house on fire. He jumps up and runs out of the house just before it is consumed in flames and reduced to ashes behind him. He is “saved,” while he suffers the “total loss” of the house and contents he spent his life building and filling with “good things.” The “good” became the enemy of the “best.”

This picture is a sobering reminder of the little saying that used to hang in many Christian homes: *“Only one life, t’will soon be past; only what’s done for Christ will last.”*

If we prioritize our lives by God’s Word, it will be a great day of...



### COMMENDATION

If there is one truth the Bible teaches about God, it is that He is both a *just* and a *loving* God. He is our Heavenly Bridegroom who "...rejoices over His bride" (Isa. 62:5)! He is our "Abba Father" (Rom. 8:15) who delights in *rewarding* His children! He is the Master Coach who takes great pride when we *run well* and *win at the game of life!*

Tragically, many people perceive God to be some kind of celestial ogre who wants to hoard His blessing. They see Him as a stingy God who wants to keep all of His rewards to Himself – a mean Judge who only grudgingly gives out His "gold, silver and bronze medals"!

Nothing could be further from the truth! That perception of God comes right out of the pit of hell! It is the most successful lie in human history – first whispered by Lucifer into Eve's ear in the Garden of Eden. Satan convinced her that God was holding out on her. That there were "good

things” that God was keeping for Himself. That God had kept the best pleasures for Himself. So she should take things into her own hands and “grab for gusto” herself! She did and the rest is history – painful history! Not only hers and Adams – but yours and mine also.

The lie that God is holding back on us has caused millions of people – even Christians – to sit in the stands and stay off the playing field of life. It has caused them to give up before they start. It has caused them to forfeit the game to the enemy without ever even playing. And there is nothing the devil enjoys any more than *robbing us of our reward!* He loves to wave the gold, silver and bronze metals in God’s face that should have been ours. He loves to flaunt before the Lord and His heavenly host the rewards that he has robbed from Christians. It gives him diabolical delight.

But the Bible assures us that God wants each one of us to “...receive his *reward.*” If we are faithful, each one of us as Christians “...will receive his *praise* from God.” The thing that brings the greatest joyful anticipation to the heart of the Lord Jesus is to be able to say to you:

*“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness”* (Mtt. 25:21).

God is waiting to stand and meet you with great *commendation!* He wants to say to you *“Well Done!”...“You ran well!”...“You stayed the course!”...“You were faithful to the end of the race!”...“You crossed the finish line!”...“You win the gold!”* Then the “master’s happiness” will be your own *eternal happiness!*

Realizing these great truths about the heavenly Award Ceremony that is awaiting us, it becomes a great...





## MOTIVATION

If all of these things are the reality that the Bible reveals them to be, they should *sober us* and *motivate us* to live for the Lord as never before! That's why Paul said: "...knowing the *fear of the Lord*, we persuade men" (II Cor. 5:11).

When Paul uses the "fear word" here, he is not talking about some sick, psychotic, phobic fear that reduces a person to guilt and condemnation. Not by a long shot. But Paul did have a *reverential fear* of the Lord that constantly motivated him. He had a "holy fear" that caused him to stay focused on the *goal* and the *gold*. He had a "healthy fear" that motivated him to live with a spiritual *sense of urgency!* It caused him to want to "redeem the time" and "make the most of every opportunity" (Eph. 5:16) for the Kingdom of God.

And Paul's life dramatically demonstrates that when you truly *fear the Lord* – you *fear nothing else!* His only fear

was the possibility of displeasing his Heavenly Coach. His only fear was that he would not “run well” or would “run in vain.”

It was the fear of the Lord that kept him in spiritual training. It was this *reverential fear* that motivated him to live a life of spiritual and physical discipline. Listen to the words of a Christian champion:

“...I do not *run aimlessly*. I do not *fight like a man beating the air*. No, *I beat my body and make it my slave* so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be *disqualified for the prize*” (I Cor. 9:26-27).

So, Paul’s *reverential fear* of the Lord kept him faithful to the end. Even though he *started poorly*, he *ended well*. Even though he wasted some early years, he later made up for lost time. And he summarized his own Christian life with athletic metaphors from the Olympics of his day. As a result of his disciplined life, he could say in humble confidence to young Timothy whom he was mentoring:

“I have *fought the good fight*, I have *finished the race*. I have *kept the faith*. Now there is in store for me the *crown of righteousness*, which the Lord, the *righteous Judge*, will *award to me on that day* – and not only to me, but *also to all who have longed for His appearing*” (II Tim. 4:7-8).



May you and I also strive to be that kind of spiritual athlete. May we too be the kind of Christian champions who will *start well...run well...win well...end well!* By His grace may we also stand on the winner's platform and receive the gold, silver or bronze medals we will wear for all eternity – for God's glory!



## CONCLUSIONS

*Terrorism* has been one of the biggest concerns surrounding these Olympics in China – just as they have been in former Olympics in the recent past in other countries. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to try and put the most sophisticated security net possible around every event. But we do not know if it will be proven successful until after the Olympics are over.

However, in the “Christian Olympics” of your life, there are also *diabolical terrorist* who hate everything you stand for. There are *spiritual assassins* who have you in their cross-hairs! They are the arch enemies of the spiritual Olympics known as the Christian life. Their one goal is to keep you from winning. They are sinister and ruthless in their design to “take you out” at any and all cost. They not only want to make you lose at the game of life – they want to make you an *eternal loser!*

The mastermind of this legion of highly trained terrorists makes the likes of Osama bin Laden seem like a pacifist by comparison! The arch enemy of your soul is none other than Satan himself. He tried to win in his competition with God before time began – but was thrown out of heaven and “...cast down to the earth” (Rev. 12:7-12). Now the Bible pictures him as a “...roaring lion seeking whom he may *devour*” (1 Pet. 5:8). And if you give him half a chance, he will not just “eat your lunch” – he will “eat you alive!”

No human anti-terrorism measures deter or detract him. Since the very dawn of human history, he has been focused like a deadly laser beam on man as the "...apple of God's eye" (Deut. 32:10; Ps. 17:8). Just like a human coach receives glory and honor when one of his teams or athletes win, we were created to bring God glory and honor by winning at the game of life (Ps. 8:5; Isa. 43:7). That's the thing that Satan hates the most. Anything that dishonors God brings delight to the devil. Therefore, when it comes to human beings, Satan *shows no mercy* and *takes no hostages!* His spiritual rap sheet says that he has been a "...*murderer* from the beginning" (Jn. 8:44).

So, beware how you compete! You are not competing and fighting against other humans. Your struggle is not against "...flesh and blood, but against *rulers*, against the *authorities*, against the *powers* of this dark world and against the *spiritual forces* of evil in the heavenly realm" (Eph. 6:12).

Because of the sin that is within and without us, none of us will run a perfect race. Since we live in a fallen and rebellious world where we are surrounded by wicked spiritual forces seeking to destroy us, there will be no perfect Olympic Games. It will be intense spiritual warfare from get-go to glory. We must get our thinking right. There are no perfect Spiritual Olympics in this life. No level playing fields. No completely fair games. No unbiased referees. No impartial judges. No perfect calls. No perfect scores. No perfect games.

The “playing field” is really a badly pock-marked “battle field.” It is filled with pot holes...pit-falls...and land mines. Your running cleats must be accompanied by combat boots! Your athletic t-shirt must be covered with a flack-jacket. Never forget that you are running your marathon during World War III.

In this race between here and glory, there will be no fair races or perfectly successful runners. All of us Christian athletes are seriously scared and marred by sin. Only the Lord Jesus was God’s Perfect Champion who ran a perfect race from start to finish. He never faulted. Never broke a rule. Never took a short-cut. Never detoured. Never gave up until He crossed the finish line victoriously. That’s why He alone is our Champion, Coach and the Captain of our Home Team. So, you must your “fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2).

But as you continue to face the “race of your life,” I want to share one of my favorite quotations with you. It was written by President Theodore Roosevelt and describes what our perspective should be as we continue to “fight the good fight of the faith” (I Tim. 6:12) from *gory* to *glory*.

“It is not the critic who counts, nor the man who points how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. *The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly.* Who errs and comes

short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions. *Who spends himself in a worthy cause.* Who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while *daring greatly* so that his place will never be with those timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat” (*The Man In The Mirror*, Patrick M. Morley, p. 168).

With that reality in mind, let me ask you some searching questions:

- *How are you doing in the game of life?*
- *How do you feel you are running?*
- *Are you ‘sitting in the stands,’ or are you ‘competing on the field?’*
- *Do you feel that you are winning or losing in your spiritual Olympics?*
- *What kind of award do you feel the Judge of the universe will give you when you stand before Him?*

One thing for sure – God wants you to be a *winner!* Not only for *time* – but also for *eternity!* He did not send His Son to die so that you would be a *loser.* He died and rose again to make you a *winner* in the game of life. And to help insure that, He has made His Holy Spirit totally available to live within you and empower you to be a *spiritual winner!*

I love the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32). It has been called the most beautiful short story ever told. It portrays the father's incredible heart of love for both of his sons. One got lost in the "far country" in licentious living. The other got "lost at home" in the business. But both were lost and radically needy. One just knew it more quickly than the other. When we are "lost in the far country", we know it. When we are "lost at home", we are often unaware of it.

However, when the Prodigal "came to himself" in the far country when he was face-down in pig manure, he humbled himself and returned home. He well knew he was not worthy to ever come home – much less be a son again. The best he could hope for was to be a lowly slave in his father's household. But his father would have none of it. He would not let him grovel. He would not even hear out his full confession. He just enveloped his son in his arms of unconditional love and forgiveness.

Because of the father's incredible grace, he quickly called his servants to clothe his son in his "best robe." He put the "ring of authority" back on his finger. He shod his bare feet with the finest new leather sandals. He killed the fatted calf. He cried out, "Let's have a *feast* and *celebrate!*" The father "threw a party" for him! Why, because the son deserved it? No. A thousand times no! This was a "Grace Party." It was totally unmerited and undeserved! The father cried out in his joy: "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So, they begin to *celebrate!*

When his older brother approached the house we are specifically told that "...he heard *music* and *dancing*" (Lk. 15:25). That's also what you will hear when you approach heaven! Sadly, the older brother was not in a "partying mood." So he missed the celebration of his life! He missed the home-coming reunion with his brother.

You see, my friend, God wants to "throw a party" for you that goes beyond anything you could ever imagine. And it will *last forever!* That's the "Master's happiness!" All the devil and his minions will be able to do is to watch from hell for all eternity while we "party-hearty!" That will give Satan eternal grief – but it will give God eternal joy! It will be His ultimate eternal victory. It's a victory celebration I do not intend to miss!

The Bible is crystal clear about this coming "eternal party" in God's new heaven and new earth. Jesus has already gone ahead to make preparations for it (Jn. 14:1-4). This eternal "Grace Party" is indescribable and literally "out of this world!" The invitation has already been written and sent out to His team. It says this: "*No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him. But God has revealed it to us by His Spirit*" (I Cor. 2:9-10). Isn't that exciting to anticipate? I know I can't wait. Don't you dare miss it either!

So, my loving exhortation to you as one of God's spiritual cheer leaders is: "***RUN TO WIN! PLAY FOR KEEPS! LIVE***"



*FOR THE GOLD!*” And one day all of the grandstands of heaven will arise and applaud as the Lord greets you with these words:

“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your *Master’s happiness!*” (Matt. 25:21).

Get ready to *party!* Until then, keep *running with all your heart for the Lord Jesus!*

In His Joy,  
J.L.

P.S. Following the Sports Camp pictures and Testimony by Professional Soccer Player Wells Thompson, please note the interesting facts on Olympic history.



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### Wells Thompson's Testimony

Born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, on November 25, 1983, I was the second of three children born to my loving, Christian parents. They tried to implant their beliefs and love for the Lord in us at home and through church activities. I thought that's how every family was raised, until I got older and understood that not everybody had been blessed as I had.

God created me as an adventurous and mischievous boy. I loved life and eagerly wanted to discover what the world had in store for me. But, in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, my life started veering off course. I became defiant and self-centered. My attitude and lifestyle resembled the people in Ezekiel 30:30-32 who listened to the Lord but did not obey Him.

Although I had been blessed with such a wonderful Christian family, I spiraled out of control. Running away

from home, getting suspended from school, fighting with my parents and run-ins with the police became common. In order to fit in with my friends and do what I wanted to do, I rebelled against God, my parents and society, getting involved in drugs, alcohol, etc.

My parents were forced to send me away to a correctional and recovery facility for troubled teens. It was a terrible and frightening day when I unwillingly arrived on the front steps. I lost all the freedoms I had once had—all the luxuries I had taken for granted were stripped from me. But, it was also the day where I began to be transformed into a more mature and responsible man.

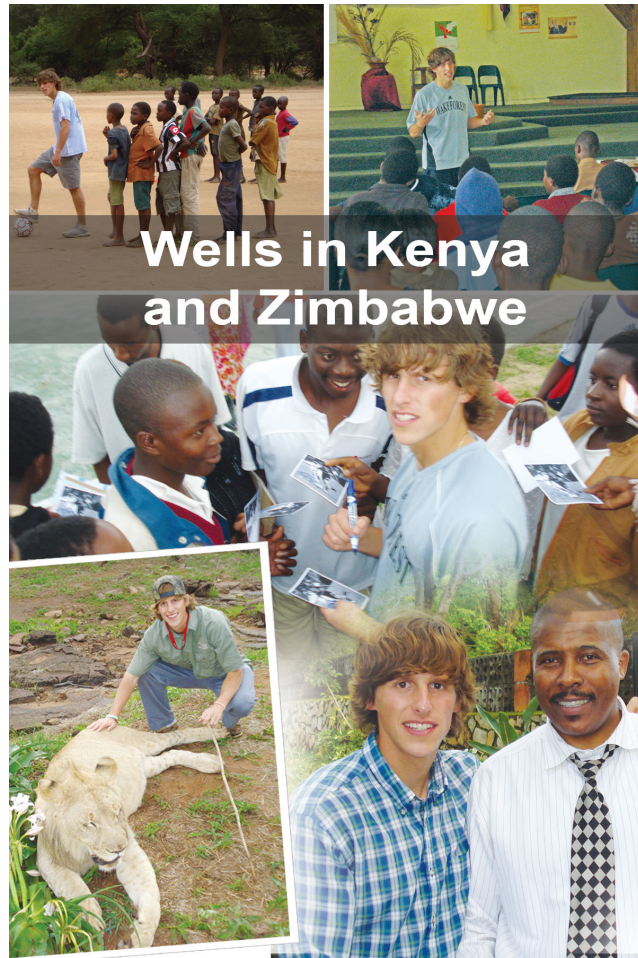
My gradual transformation reminds me of John 8:11, “Go now and leave your life of sin.” Ashamed of my past actions, bad behavior and all the hurt I had caused my family and loved ones, I found refuge in God’s saving grace. The Family Foundation School was God’s tool to get His message into my coarse, immature and hardened heart!

It had been one thing to have my parents’ beliefs impressed upon me, but it was another thing to make it personal and develop my own relationship with the Lord. A fire was ignited in my heart and soul for the Lord as I confessed my sins, and I was strengthened by Jesus Christ, the answer for eternal salvation.



But a mission trip to Africa with J.L. Williams was, without a doubt, the most pivotal point in my walk with the Lord. I went on the trip to serve the Lord and help those in need. But, in reality, I was helped ten-fold! One area was that it made me look back on my rookie year with the professional soccer team, The Revolution. I saw that I had gotten caught up in the glitz and glamour of being a professional athlete. I had chosen to be a closet Christian—I didn't want to talk about it. It was like I was leading two different lives.

In Africa, I felt the Holy Spirit consuming me, calling me to completely give myself to Him—to do everything for Him. I came out of Africa a different person than I went in and returned home with the lingering thought of how I want to be remembered. Africa taught me that I do not want to be remembered as a soccer player, but rather as someone who lived for and loved the Lord. As I continue to live for Him, Philippians 4:13 reminds me that it is Christ who strengthens me in all things.



## Wells in Kenya and Zimbabwe



## OLYMPIC FACTS

### BRIEF HISTORY:

- According to legend and mythology, the first ancient Olympic Games were founded by *Heracles*, a son of Zeus – the Greek equivalent of the Roman *Hercules*. Obviously there is no date for this mythological Olympic among the gods.
- The first believed Olympic Games, for which there are written records, were held in 776 BC. However they believe that the Games had actually been going on for many year prior to that.
- At this first Olympic Games, a naked runner, *Coroebus* – who was a cook from Elis – won the sole event at the Olympics in a run of approximately 192 meters, or 210 yards. This made Coroebus the very first known Olympic champion in history.
- The ancient Olympic Games grew and continued to be played every 4 years for nearly 1,200 years. But in 393 AD, the Roman Emperor Theodosius I – who

was a Christian, abolished the Olympics because of their pagan influence.

- Around 1,500 years later a young French aristocrat named *Pierre de Coubertin* began to try and revive the Olympics. He felt that one of the reasons for the French loss in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 was that the French soldiers “lacked vigor.” He felt they were flabby and out of shape. So, he became a strong advocate of exercise to get them in shape – specifically sports. Initially, his idea was not met with much success. But, on Nov. 25, 1892, he met with some success when he founded the *Union des Sports Athletiques* in Paris.
- Two years later he was able to organize a meeting of 79 delegates from 9 different countries at which he finally aroused significant interest in reviving the Olympic Games. The delegates voted unanimously for the Olympics to be reestablished. An official committee was formed that became known as the *International Olympic Committee* (IOC) – which basically exists to this day.
- As a result, the very first modern Olympic Games were played in April, 1896, in Athens, Greece. While not widely known or publicized, most athletes came individually and at their own expense. Most wore the athletic uniforms of their various athletic clubs, rather than that of their individual countries.

- At that first modern Olympic there were approximately 300 athletes participating from 13 countries.
- The primary competitions that were held were: pole vaulting, sprints, shot put, weight lifting, swimming, cycling, target shooting, tennis, marathon and gymnastics.

#### **OLYMPIC CITIES & DATES:**

- The Olympic Committee chooses a *city* and not a *country* to host the Games.
- A different city is chosen for the Summer Olympics than for the Winter Olympics.
- Below are all of the Olympic Cities on record to date.

#### **1. SUMMER OLYMPICS:**

- 1896 – Athens, Greece
- 1900 – Paris, France
- 1904 – St. Louis, USA
- 1908 – London, England
- 1912 – Stockholm, Sweden
- 1920 – Antwerp, Belgium (\*)
- 1924 – Paris, France
- 1928 – Amsterdam, Netherlands
- 1932 – Los Angeles, USA

- 1936 – Berlin, Germany
- 1948 – London, England
- 1952 – Helsinki, Finland
- 1956 – Melbourne, Australia
- 1960 – Rome, Italy
- 1964 – Tokyo, Japan
- 1968 – Mexico City, Mexico
- 1972 – Munich, Germany
- 1976 – Montreal, Canada
- 1980 – Moscow, USSR
- 1984 – Los Angeles, USA
- 1988 – Seoul, South Korea
- 1992 – Barcelona, Spain
- 1996 – Atlanta, Georgia, USA
- 2000 – Sydney, Australia
- 2004 – Athens, Greece
- 2008 – Beijing, China
- 2012 – London, England

(\*) Due to World War I & II, the Summer Olympics were not held in 1916, 1940 & 1944.

## **2. WINTER OLYMPICS:**

- 1924 – Chamonix, France
- 1928 – St. Moritz, Switzerland
- 1932 – Lake Placid, NY, USA
- 1936 – Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

- 1948 – St. Moritz, Switzerland (\*\*)
- 1952 – Oslo, Norway
- 1956 – Cortina d’Ampezzo, Italy
- 1960 – Squaw Valley, California, USA
- 1964 – Innsbruck, Austria
- 1968 – Grenoble, France
- 1972 – Sapporo, Japan
- 1976 – Innsbruck, Austria
- 1980 – Lake Placid, NY, USA
- 1984 – Lillehammer, Norway (\*\*\*)
- 1998 – Nagano, Japan
- 2002 – Salt Lake city, Utah, USA
- 2006 – Turin, Italy
- 2010 – Vancouver, Canada
- 2014 – Sochi, Russia

(\*\*) Due to World war II, the winter Olympic games were not held in 1940 & 1944.

(\*\*\*) The 1992 & 1994 winter Games are held two years apart due to the transition of the Winter Games to alternating even-numbered years with regard to the Summer Olympics.

### **OLYMPIC FLAG:**

- It was created in 1914 by Pierre de Coubertin.
- It is composed of 5 interconnecting rings on a white background.
- The 5 rings symbolize the 5 major continents intertwined through the friendship the Games make possible.
- From left to right, the colors are: blue, yellow, black, green & red because at least one of these colors are found on the flag of every country of the world.
- The Olympic Flag was first flown at the 1920 Games.

### **OPENING CEREMONY:**

- During the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic games, the procession of athletes is always led by the Greek team.
- They are followed by all the other teams in alphabetical order.
- The last team to enter the stadium is always from the host country.

### **OLYMPIC MOTTO:**

- It was borrowed by Pierre de Coubertin from the Latin phrase: *Citius, altius, Fortius*.
- It means: "Swifter, Higher, Stronger".



#### **OLYMPIC OATH:**

- “In the name of all competitors, I promise that we shall take part in these Olympic Games, respecting and abiding by the rules that govern them, in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of the sport and the honor of our teams”.
- During the opening ceremony of the Olympics, one athlete is chosen to recite this oath in behalf of all of the other athletes.
- This Oath was first taken in the 1920 Olympic games by Belgian fencer, Victor Boin.

#### **OLYMPIC CREED:**

- “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well”.
- Once again this creed goes back to Pierre de Coubertin. He got the idea for it from a speech given by Bishop Ethelbert Talbot at the service for Olympic champions during the 1908 Games.

### **OLYMPIC FLAME:**

- This is an ancient symbol going back to the very first Olympic Games in Olympia, Greece.
- A flame was ignited by the sun and kept burning until the closing of the games.
- Among other things, the flame represents purity and the endeavor for perfection.
- The Olympic Flame first appeared at the 1928 Games in Amsterdam, Netherlands.
- In 1936, Carl Diem suggested the now famous tradition of lighting the Olympic Torch at the ancient site in Olympia, Greece by women wearing ancient style robes. They light the torch by using a curved mirror reflecting the light of the sun. The lighted torch is then passed from runner to runner from the ancient city to the host city. There the flame is kept burning until the closing ceremony of the Olympics.
- This flame represents a continuation from the ancient Olympics to the modern ones.

### **OLYMPIC HYMN:**

- It is played when the Olympic Flag is raised at the Opening Ceremony.
- The first Opening Ceremony for an Olympic was held in 1908 at the Games in London (\*).
- The music was composed by Spyros Samaras and the words added by Kostis Palamas.

- It was first played at the 1896 Olympic games in Athens but was not declared the official hymn by the IOC until 1957.

#### **OLYMPIC MEDALS:**

- The last Olympic gold medals that were made out of real gold was in 1912.
- The Olympic medals are designed especially for each individual Olympic games by the host city's organizing committee.
- Each medal must be at least 3 millimeters thick and 60 millimeters in diameter.
- The gold and silver Olympic medals must be made out of 92.5% silver with the gold medal covered in six grams of gold.
- James B. Connolly of the United States was the first Olympic champion of the modern Games in 1896. He won in the hop, step and jump event.
- The first marathon is believed to have been held in 490 BC. At that time a Greek soldier by the name of Pheidippides, ran from Marathon to Athens to inform the Athenians of the outcome of the battle with the invading Persians. It was a distance of about 25 miles. The distance was filled with hills and other obstacles. When he finally arrived – exhausted and with bleeding feet – he gave the report of the Greek victory and then fell to the ground dead. In 1896 at the first modern Olympics,

a marathon race of approximately the same distance was held to commemorate this run by Pheidippides.

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\*Information for this summary was gathered by the author from a variety of internet sources: Interesting Olympic Facts by Jennifer Rosenberg; About.com; Britannica.com; Olympic Game Cities, by Matt Rosenberg, etc.

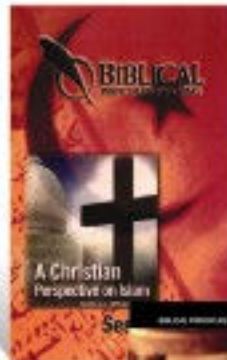
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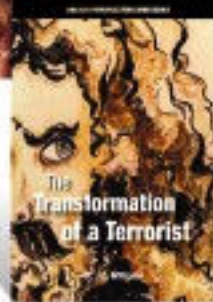
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