

Olympic Preparation for an Olympic Reward  
(part 2 of “Olympic Preparation”, August 18, 2013)

Hebrews 11:39 - 12:29

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The ancient Olympics were a training ground for war. The goal was to provide an arena to identify those men who would be strong enough and bold enough to lead their country in war. The Greeks and the Romans used the ancient Olympics as a testing ground, a time of preparation, for the real battles, not those that would be fought in the arena, but those that would be fought with swords, and spears, and armour, and hand-to-hand combat. In that combat, it didn't matter whether you fought well or not; it mattered whether you won or not.

Throughout the pages of the New Testament, author after author uses the imagery of the Olympic games to tell Christians: this is what you are to be doing. You are to be engaged in a time of preparation, a testing, for the real battles that you will face. You need this preparation so that when these battles come, you are able to win, rather than to be humiliated by the enemy.

But the war that you are preparing for is not one that is against flesh and blood. And so your preparation will have to be very different. It will not be less strenuous, but it will be very different. For your war will be against the enemy of God: the devil and all the supernatural forces of evil that he has at his disposal. Yes, it is true: sometimes this enemy will come in human form, because he does use humans for his purposes, just as God does. But, your enemy is not the human that the devil uses any more than we are the devil's opponent. The devil tries to defeat us if we are being used by God to defeat him. If we are not, then the devil couldn't care less about us. Your enemy is not the German youth dressed in a Nazi uniform. Your enemy is not the person marching in the Gay Pride parade. Your enemy is not the adulteress you steals your husband. Your enemy is the Devil by whose power these people are used by him and coaxed into actions that, if they were in their right minds, they probably would not be doing. That doesn't excuse people who collaborate with evil. But, it does mean that you can't defeat evil simply by defeating humans who are used by evil or even those who collaborate with evil. Your enemy is the one who stands behind these people as their master. That's the target against which God equips you to fight, if you are prepared properly.

The preparation for fighting this enemy has to be different from the kind of preparation that showed itself in the ancient Olympic arena. The Olympic arena for the Christian is not an occasion to show dominant physical strength. Our enemy can only be defeated by those who been trained in telling the truth, in walking in Christ's righteousness, in peace-making, in knowing and speaking God's word in the power of the Spirit, and by those who have been trained in the exercise of faith.

Is this demanding? You know how demanding physical exercise is, don't you? All athletes do.

When I first started serious physical training, I started swimming. I could swim half a lap. I slowly increased my ability until finally I was able to swim, 2 laps, then 10, then 20... and now I can easily swim a mile using various strokes. It took me months of hard work.

When I first started training for road drills on the bicycle, I thought I was going to die. And slowly I worked up to being able to breathe. Now, I can easily cycle at full pace for 3 hours. But, it took months, even years, to get to that point. Bringing your body through any physical exertion to the point of full physical fitness demands work, demands time, demands consistency. Imagine how demanding it is to prepare for the Olympics, and then for war?

Why would we think it any less difficult to train for spiritual fitness to achieve that spiritual excellence that will make us more than conquerors in the battle that really counts? I know there are those who say: Just rely on the Spirit. Those people have been around since the 2nd century when they were deemed to be heretics. They thought that they could just go to sleep at night and wake up the next morning equipped by the Spirit to go into battle. They didn't have to study, or pray, or prepare. They would just be infused with God's Spirit. They took Jesus' words that we should not be worried about what we will say when brought to trial and said: Oh, that means it will be easy.

It was against this kind of thinking that Paul wrote, and also the author of the letter to the Hebrews. There is nothing easy about the Christian life, and that's why there is a reward at the end. The crown goes to the victor, not simply to the person who has raced.

Those who tell the truth and defeat lies? They will be given the crown. But, do you really think it's that easy to tell the truth, especially when the Devil is the master of telling lies? How do you defeat lies? Addictions are one of the best ways for evil to defeat God's good purposes for His creation. Do you know how to speak the truth when you encounter the disease of addiction? Do you know how to defend yourself against slander, especially when the Devil lies about you to the father, as he did Job? The best way is to point to your life. But, is your life a life of truth, or is it built on one lie after another? In the midst of the many lies that are spread abroad in the world as disinformation by the Devil, do you know how to find out the truth? How much energy and time do you spend trying to find out whether what you tell someone else is actually correct, accurate, or is it just what you've heard someone else say, gossip that you've passed on, some piece of advice you learned from the Internet? Excelling at telling the truth is not easy.<sup>1</sup>

What about peace-making? Do you really think it's easy to make peace, especially where evil is involved and interested in keeping conflict going? What about conflict at home, or at

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<sup>1</sup> Truth-telling is not limited to Christians. Whoever wishes to tell the truth will have to prepare well to do so, and be prepared for the consequences of doing so. An eloquent testimony to telling the truth against evil, and suffering for it, is found in the report – published the day that this sermon was given – on the recent death of Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, “Battling superstition, Indian paid with his life”, *New York Times*, Sunday, August 25, 2013, A1. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/25/world/asia/battling-superstition-indian-paid-with-his-life.html?pagewanted=all>

work, or in the church? What do you do when there's a conflict? Many people walk away. Others wade in and make things worse. Have you taken the time to find out how to make peace where there is conflict? Have you taken the time and energy to wade into a conflict in a person's life and use what you've learned to bring peace to their lives? What makes you think that this is an easy task? And yet, when spiritual warfare comes, peace-making is one of the things that you will take into battle with you to win. Practice now.

Last week we learned that faith was the heavy shield that Christians are to carry when they go into spiritual warfare. Faith was the tool in the combats that our ancestors engaged in that enabled them to ward off the enemies' blows. Faith was what enabled Abel, and Noah, and Abraham, and Moses to be victorious in the end. And we are to learn from their examples.

In fact, the writer to the Hebrews says that we should look at them precisely as examples for us:

<sup>39</sup> And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup> since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. (Heb 11:39-40 RSV)

Faith is being able to see what others cannot see and keeping our eyes fixed on that. Faith is being able to see God, who is invisible to the human eye; faith is being able to see what God is going to do in the future, even though it's still in the future; faith is seeing what God can do in the present, even though it seems impossible. ... just as Enoch, and Noah, and Abraham, and a whole host of those who have gone before us experienced and won their battles.

You might say: Oh, I find belief quite easy. But, the point of practicing your faith, of working on seeing what others can't see, of trying to discern what God is going to do in the future, of trying to discern what God is doing even now, is because in battle, when the fog of work will confuse you because the smoke of battle will be so thick, the voices clamouring for your attention so many, the sight of your brothers and sisters falling in battle beside you... all of these sights and sounds which you can see with your human eye and hear with your human ear will confuse you from keeping your spiritual eyes fixed on what others can no longer see. And the Devil will rejoice in that confusion because it will keep you from being effective for the Lord.

Specifically, we are to practice keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. Why?

Because, as vs 2 tells us he is "faith's pioneer and perfecter". He is our Lord and saviour. That would be reason enough.

But, we are also to keep our eyes on him because he is the perfect model of Christian warrior, who showed us how to fight in the battle that really matters. If anyone had reason to get confused in battle, it was Jesus, who had all the sins of all humanity placed on his shoulders, who as vs. 3 says had sinners shouting out to him trying to confuse him ... yet, the author of Hebrews says that "He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God's throne. (Heb 12:2 CEB)"

Because at the end of the Olympic trials, at the end of the war, when there is victory, there is a reward. In the ancient Olympics, the winner of a competition was given a laurel crown and a huge vat of olive oil, a very precious commodity. But, more importantly, that athlete had the honour of his people, and the knowledge that when conflict came, he would be the first one to which the people would go and tell him: You lead us into battle. And of course in war, too, there was a reward: victory over a people who threatened you. Peace, prosperity, and a bright hope for the future.

Jesus, who prepared every day of his earthly life for the great battle that would take place at the end, who prepared through daily prayer, learning and meditating on His Father's words, which were the very food that he lived on, who prepared to fight the Devil in the end by fighting him first on the mountain of temptation with God's Word and faith, who fought daily against the demons that plagued the lives of simple men and women, and he freed them from their bonds as a sign of what he would do for them in the end, which was to free them from all sin and evil. And that happened when Jesus came to his great spiritual battle, suffered, bled, died ... and won. For that God raised Him from the dead and had him sit down at His right hand as victor, where he forever experiences the full joy of the Father's love.

Each of us is invited to share in that joy. That is part of our reward. This is not happiness as we experience it here on earth. This is joy, that profound sense of exhilaration that you perhaps occasionally get a taste for when you realize that everything is alright, and almost seems that everything will always be alright. The joy of heaven is knowing what can only be known here by faith: everything will always be alright.

Also, we are told that one of our rewards will be to share in God's holiness (vs. 10). The ancient world was an incredibly dirty place, filled with threats to health from disease and bacteria and toxins. If you go into many highly undeveloped countries today, you'll get a taste for what the ancient world was like. Our daughter lives in Nicaragua. When we visited her there this year, we were struck by how dusty and dirty it was. It is impossible not to get sick with some bacterial infection, some parasite... not just visitors but also the people who live there. And yet, when Evangelical Christians go to church on Sundays in Nicaragua, they get cleaned up and wear their absolute finest clothes, clean and bright. They know that this is just a picture of what one day they will receive, if they are faithful, when they are made pure and spotless, washed and clean, in other words, holy in the presence of the Father. No stain, no dirt, no disease, no ugliness, nothing that kills.

But, they also know that to receive this great reward, they must first run the race:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, (Heb 12:1 RSV)

They know that difficult times are coming. Like the author of the letter to the Hebrews, they know that things can and will get worse: In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Heb 12:4 NRS), just as the ancient Olympics were known for the blood that was spilled.

They know that even to get to this Olympic race, which is itself only training for the final combat, they need to discipline themselves and get ready for it. They know that the Father who will welcome them with joy and holiness, even now is helping them train for the race, and the war.

<sup>5</sup> And have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons? -- "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. <sup>6</sup> For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." <sup>7</sup> It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup> For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. <sup>11</sup> For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. <sup>12</sup> Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, (Heb 12:5-12 RSV)

And he will help us. When the battle is at its worst, God will give to his faithful, by the gift of His Holy Spirit, a renewed vision of what lies before us, to encourage us. By this vision of the reward that lies before us, the Holy Spirit will lift our sagging arms in the battle; He will strengthen our weak knees; He will breathe into us courage and hope when our human spirits flag. And then he will say to us: Now, with boldness and confidence that comes from God alone, walk straight toward that which lies before you, what you see with the eyes of faith alone, what is hidden from everyone who is not of the family of faith. It is a fire, a confusing fire. It will consume all of your badness, your ugliness, and your falsehood. And once you have walked through it, and have been purified, you will be clothed with joy and holiness, even as Christ is now clothed, reigning at the Father's right hand.

Are you ready? Have you prepared? The victory of God is assured. He graciously invites us to share in the reward of that victory. The battle won't be easy, but the reward is worth more than in this life you could ever ask or imagine.

*Blessing:*

*Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. AMEN (Hebrew 13:20-21)*