

## **The everlasting crown**

Poem "Heaven" in Swindoll "What it takes to win" p1 possibly by Myrtle Erickson 1956

***Think of-***

***Stepping on shore, and finding it heaven!***

***Of taking hold of a hand, and finding it God's hand.***

***Of breathing a new air, and finding it celestial air.***

***Of feeling invigorated, and finding it immortality.***

***Of passing from storm to tempest to an unbroken calm.***

***Of waking up, and finding it Home.***

In 1 Corinthians 3 (6-8) Paul teaches that we all have a job to do in God's eternal plan, that salvation is by grace, a gift of Christ (11) but after salvation comes judgement and rewards.

So what does the average overworked, useless feeling child of God do about getting ready for heaven? Not a lot, we're just too busy. Heaven is on hold while we get on with the treadmill of life.

When you feel weary and overlooked while faithfully doing your job as an employee, parent, grandparent or friend -God is watching and has rewards for you. Treasure in heaven. Crowns.

**Who shall obtain these crowns?** *Every child of God shall obtain them*, enjoying Christ in all His fullness. There will be no inhabitant of glory deprived of righteousness, life, glory, or rejoicing; and none will be presented a crown that perishes.

## The marathon runner

Drawing upon athletic imagery, the apostle Paul compared the Christian life to the gruelling marathon race, an event well known to the first century Christians. Writing to the Corinthian believers, who lived only ten miles away from the famous Isthmian games, second in importance only to the Olympic games, he challenged them not merely to enter the race of faith and go through the mundane motions of running for Christ. Rather; he says to 'go all out' and run in such a way that we may win. God wants us to be winners, not losers!

Imagine - that moment when the lonely marathoner re-enters the Olympic stadium for the final lap of the gruelling 26-mile race. As the fatigued figure presses to the finish line, the crowd rises to its feet to cheer him on. Straining every muscle in his body the runner pushes through the tape, and before, the watching eyes of the world, is awarded the coveted gold medal. This is one of sports most celebrated events! On one occasion, hours after the race had been won and most people had gone home, in limped the Tanzanian runner, every step causing pain, his knee bandaged and bleeding from a fall, and why? He said "My country did not send me 7,000 miles away to start the race. They sent me 7,000 to finish it." He did not win the race but he finished it, and, offered to all Christians who finish the race of life is the everlasting or imperishable crown.

In our present sports-crazed society perhaps no biblical metaphor better illustrates the reality of living for Jesus Christ.

## RUN TO WIN!

First, determination. In a marathon race, no one can win with a half-hearted commitment. No one merely 'shows up' and comes in first. Instead, a strong resolve - what athletes call the "will to win" - has to be present. The same is true in the Christian life. Paul writes, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize." (1 Corinthians 9:24). Once entered, we must take our spiritual life seriously, pushing ourselves to the limit, and be deeply committed to winning it. This is not speaking of salvation or earning our entrance into the race but calling us to make whatever sacrifice is necessary to win the victor's crown at the end of the race. It is relatively easy to start the Christian life, but is harder as the years increase - the run slows to a jog, to a stroll, to a snooze. Jesus said "because of the increase of wickedness, the love of MOST will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end WILL be saved." Matt 24:12-3 Will receive the winner's crown. So let us pursue holiness and avoid compromise.

The most coveted prize of the Roman Empire was the Stephanos (the laurel-like wreath that was placed upon the head of the champion). Made of leafy greenery, the victor's crown brought instant fame, tax exemptions, and free education. Carved statues of the winner lined the highways that led to the site of the games. Calling for our total commitment, the Apostle Paul writes, "They do it to get a crown (a perishable wreath) that will not last; but we do it to get (an imperishable) a crown that will last forever" (1 Corinthians 9:25b).

If a marathon runner would be so dedicated to win a withering pine wreath and short-lived fame, how much more ought we be determined to gain what is eternal - the imperishable crown? The reality of this future prize should ignite our faith and inspire us every step of the race. No sacrifice we make for Christ will ever outweigh the sheer thrill of winning this celestial prize. With unfailing determination, we must run in order to receive that crown. Even the aged bed ridden believer can be running the race to meet their Lord - Rob Lawrence.

Are we intent upon winning this crown? Are we striving for personal holiness or just happy to be taking part and listed among those who began once upon a time. Are we determined? Do not settle for second best. Run to win! Because of Jesus rules we can ALL be winners, if we finish.

The Asian monkey trap is nothing more than a heavy pot with a narrow neck. A peanut is placed inside the pot to lure the monkey. The monkey's hand can reach into the pot, but when he grabs the peanut, his fist becomes too big to come back out. The pot is too big to carry away, so the monkey is stuck unless he dumps the peanut. Most monkeys are too hard-headed to let go, and they stay trapped.

Before we laugh at the stupid monkey, think of the things that trap us because we won't let go! To attain our God-given dreams, we need to let go and lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us. Why? So we can run with endurance the race that is set before us. (See Hebrews 12:1). Someone who runs with a backpack full of rocks is at a disadvantage to a runner who has laid aside every weight. Yet we voluntarily try to run toward our dreams with a load a stuff that's holding us back and slowing us down.

There are things that we must lay aside if we are to run well in this race. The more we lay aside, the better we run. In a race, the runners wear very light clothing and shoes. They carry nothing that is not absolutely necessary. So many people go through life carrying unnecessary and incapacitating burdens. In life's race we are sometimes inclined to hold on to what we don't need and throw away necessary things. Once when a minister was travelling, and changed planes he noticed that his coat pocket was filled with empty ticket folders and various documents. He stopped by a rubbish bin and unloaded.

He was careful not to throw away his current plane ticket, but after the plane had taken off, he noticed a rather large check that had been in my pocket was gone. He realised that I had thrown it in the rubbish bin at the airport. He was able to get a replacement check and stop payment on the discarded check, but he should have been more careful.

We need to learn what to dump and what to keep, from Scripture, through prayer and from each other?

## **DISCIPLINE! DISCIPLINE!**

Second, discipline. In the ancient games, victory depended upon the athlete's rigorous training program. Every runner was required to enter into ten months of strict training under the watchful eye of an official. Winning required stringent discipline to this regime, even for the best of athletes. Marathon runners were known to work out for years - lifting weights, carrying out drills, running laps, regulating their sleep, restricting their diet, abstaining from alcohol - all to win the prize.

Drawing upon this background, Paul writes, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training (exercises self-control in all things)" (1 Corinthians 9:25). Self-control means we must exercise mastery over our lives, foregoing some pleasures, pursuing other disciplines, all for the purpose of winning. An undisciplined lifestyle is a sure way to lose the race. How well do we resist temptation? The 4 "s" that disqualify many - Silver, Self, Sloth, Sex.

Do we avoid self-indulgence, stay on track and steer clear of distractions like the burger van, careful about our diet of TV, books, and company.

In order to achieve godliness, we must be committed to the basic spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. Paul exhorts us, "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."

Or as another translation puts it "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:7-8). Only as we expend energy, working out in God's Word and building up our spiritual muscles in prayer, will we receive energy - the supernatural power of God - needed to run the race. Victory belongs to the self-disciplined.

## **STAY ON TRACK**

Third, direction. The marathon course was clearly marked, winding through the surrounding landscape of the area.

It was critical that every runner know exactly where the track was, and not depart from it. Furthermore, he must never lose sight of the finish line, but keep his eyes fixed on the goal.

With this in mind, Paul writes, "Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly;" (1 Corinthians 9:26). This divinely-designed track, known as God's will, is clearly marked by His Word.

It is a narrow path that includes every aspect of our lives -our personal life, our home life, our work life, our church life, our business life. Winning the prize requires seeking direction from God's Word and following the course it requires.

An aimless runner, one who lacks clear direction, will never win. If he is to capture the crown, he must compete with certain knowledge of the track that is set before him. With singular purpose, Paul ran God's race for his life. Whatever you do, stay on track with your life.

To help us keep on track we in Hesus annually repeat our commitment both to God and the fellowship in our annual covenant service and annual membership signing.

## **BUFFET YOUR BODY**

Fourth, denial. Every athlete had to give up certain comforts in order to win the prize. No pain, no gain. Throughout his training, the athlete punished his body, forgoing a life of ease and bodily impulses, in order to get in shape. And during the race, he pushed himself to the limit to gain the victory.

The same self-denial is absolutely necessary in the Christian life. Paul writes, "I beat my body and make it my slave" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Shifting metaphors from running to boxing, Paul goes on to say we must beat our bodies black and blue, wielding a series of knockout punches to our fleshly desires. We must resist all temptation, and remain pure and blameless. Calling upon every ounce of strength within us, we must deny ourselves and pursue personal holiness with total abandonment.

Lest we think winning the crown is automatic, even the apostle Paul was cautious when he wrote "after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:27). Breaking the rules, he said, meant disqualification. Not loss of salvation, but loss of reward. Even when a runner finished first, if he violated the rules, he would be stripped of his crown and disqualified from the games. The Christian life is no different. With unmistakable clarity, Paul later stated, "If anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules" (2 Timothy 2:5).

No matter how impressive a believer's life may appear, winning the prize requires genuine obedience to God's Word. Keeping the rules is absolutely necessary for victory! So the questions are: Are you buffeting your body? Where do you need to be fully obedient to God? Just do it!

## **THE JUDGE'S SEAT**

After the race, the most anticipated moment occurred. It was then that every runner was brought to stand before the raised, wooden platform in the middle of the track that supported a throne-like seat. Upon this chair sat the presiding judge of the games. Each athlete would either be crowned,



passed over, or disqualified.

So it will be for us as believers in Jesus Christ. Ron Scanlon disqualified.

With soul-stirring challenge, Paul wrote, " For 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." (2 Corinthians 5:10).

At the end of our race, we will be summoned to stand before the Lord Jesus. At this tribunal, He will review how we ran our race, either bestowing or withholding His reward. Thus, every step of the Christian life race has eternal importance. Right now counts forever! Let us run with growing anticipation of that future moment when we will stand before Christ. In that final day, may He place the imperishable crown upon our heads, as we give Him glory, saying, " But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:57).

It is an incorruptible or imperishable crown." Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a (perishable) crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever." (1 Corinthians 9:25). Everything on this earth is perishable, because it is a place" where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal" (Matthew 6:19). After a few years, that crown of laurel leaves would become so brittle that the slightest touch could cause it to disintegrate. Even a crown of gold, which may last thousands of years, will be destroyed when Jesus returns (2 Peter 3:10). However, our reward in heaven is "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away" (1 Peter 1:4).

**The *imperishable crown*** for those who exhibit disciplined lives and who build their lives with works that please God (1 Corinthians 9:25-27).

Scripture does not mention this crown as a reward for any particular deed, just as a reward for having completed the race. All will get this incorruptible crown. So it is not at the exclusion of others nor is it for something special that you do.

### Conclusion

When the Christian life seems tough, hang on in there, nothing you do for Him is insignificant, it will be worth it.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

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