

Running, Boxing, Wrestling for God

by Lance Shilton

RUNNING, BOXING, WRESTLING FOR GOD

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The ancient Olympic Games used to be held at Olympia on the plain near the West Coast of Greece. The scene was the sacred precinct of the god Zeus. It was surrounded by a wall. The chief building which this enclosed was the great temple of Zeus containing the famous seated statue of the god by Phidias. The Games were blessed with the gods as their patrons, and came to last 5 days and were held every 4 years. They died out in the 4th Century A.D. and were revived in Athens in 1896.

When these great national and religious festivals began is unknown, but from the 9th Century B.C. the Greek states observed a sacred truce when all fighting ceased to enable competitors and visitors to travel and return in safety. The traditional list of victors date from 776 B.C. Today, instead of the Games becoming a pretext for peace, they have become an occasion of strife. It was reported from Mexico City that the 1968 Olympics will be held in circumstances even grimmer than those of the 1936 Games in Nazi Germany. Preceded by riots and multiple deaths, injuries and arrests, they will proceed under the threat of violence. The President of Mexico will watch the opening ceremony from a bullet-proof box. Thousands of armed troops will guard the venues. All this is so characteristic of the world in which we live.

As we look at our New Testament we notice many allusions to the athletic contests, and we are therefore led to ask, "Did Paul or other New Testament writers go to the Olympic Games in their day?" It is not likely that Paul did. For better or for worse, Paul was not brought up in the best English public school tradition with its emphasis upon sport. The Jews were never as keen about public games as were the Greeks.

Jason, High Priest from B.C. 174-171, was condemned for introducing Greek games and causing the priests to neglect the Services of the Sanctuary by hastening to the gymnasium.

Josephus, Jewish historian, tells us that the theatre and amphitheatre built in Jerusalem by Herod the Great were antagonistic to Jewish sentiment.

However, the sportsman's terminology would be very familiar to people at the time of the writing of the New Testament, and so

it was widely used for spiritual analogies amongst Jews and Gentiles alike.

1. RUNNING:

The earliest and most important event was the stadion, a short foot-race of 200 yards. The writer to the Hebrew Christians therefore said in Hebrews 12:1, "Let us run with patience the race that is set before us."

THE RUNNER NEEDS TO STRIP.

The runner must not be burdened with superfluous flesh nor hampered by encumbrances of any kind. The Christian must lay aside both weights and sins. "let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that doth so easily beset us."

There is a difference between a weight and a sin. A weight may not be wrong in itself but it may be a hindrance - wrong use of time, unprofitable habits, unnecessary luxuries. These weights will weigh down the Christian so that his running is reduced to dawdling. Sin, on the other hand, is something wrong in itself. The Greek adjective translated, "which doth so easily beset us", occurs only here in the New Testament. It refers to sin being like a garment entangling and hampering our movement - stubbornness, censoriousness, self-centredness, bad temper, gossiping, self-righteous criticism, sensuality. The runner must ruthlessly fling aside every encumbrance and sin. He must be stripped.

THE RUNNER NEEDS A GOOD START.

In a race much depends upon ability to get off the mark quickly. In this Church we endeavour to give the person who begins the Christian race a good start. Those whose Christian life begins at Guest Services, or through personal counselling, or at house parties, are immediately introduced to a trained counsellor, given a series of Bible Studies to do, and introduced to one of the Church organisations.

Professor Henry Drummond, who wrote the famous book on God's love entitled, "The Greatest Thing in the World", could not remember a time when he was not a follower of Christ. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, at 17 was organising his mates for evangelistic work. Parents have a solemn responsibility to see their children get off their mark quickly with a good start.

THE RUNNER NEEDS ENDURANCE.

"Let us run with patience." Here patience is a strong word

meaning "resolution" (N.E.B.), "endurance, steadfastness". To endure is to remain when others drop out, to continue when others give in. Endurance is the crowning quality. Field Marshal Montgomery used to say, "The British people can fight longer without success than any other." Samson, Saul and Solomon began well but grew slack through self-indulgence. Demas was lured from the Christian track through love of power and desire for popularity. Sometimes a whole Church has gone off the track through lack of resolution and steadfastness. Paul says in I Corinthians 9:27, "I run the race then with determination" (J.B. Phillips)

THE RUNNER NEEDS CLEAR VISION.

The eyes of the runner need to be firmly fixed in front of him. So it is with the Christian. His eyes must be fixed on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. The Greek word means not only looking unto, but the use of an additional preposition gives it the meaning of looking away unto. In the Christian life you must look away from the surroundings - the circumstances must not bind you to themselves.

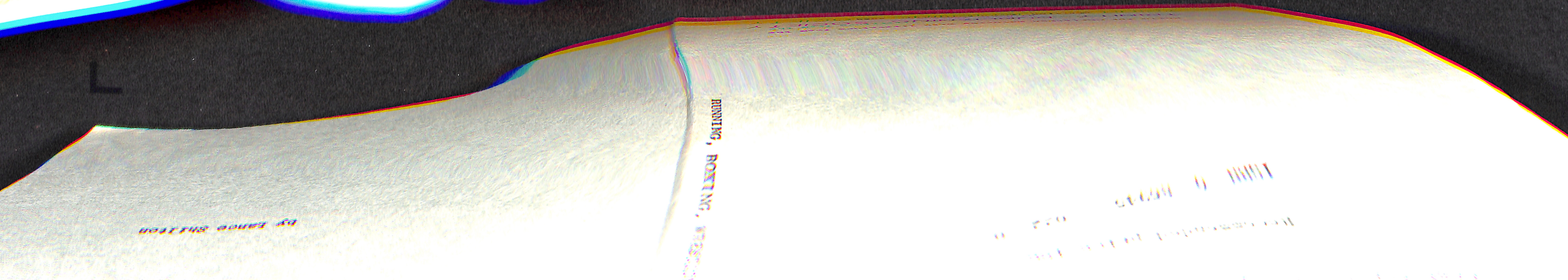
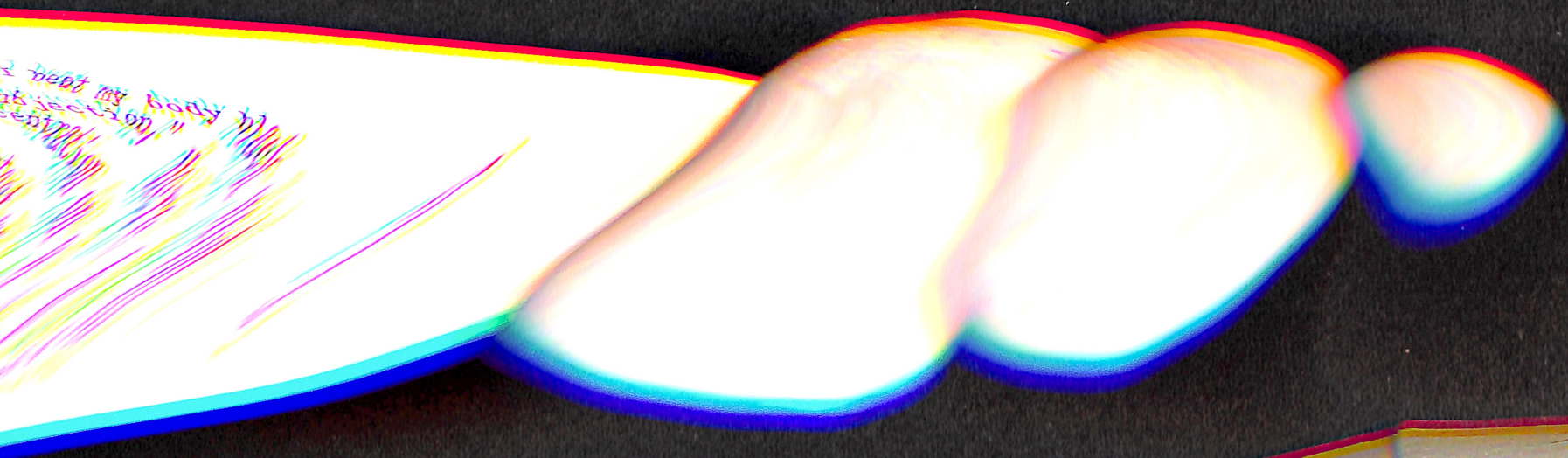
- look away from self - self-consciousness, self-complacency, self-pity, self-praise, self-reliance, selfishness.
- look away from sin - its attraction and temptation
- look away from other people - their praise, their blame, their success, their failure, their high standards, their low standards.

With clear vision look away from all these things to Jesus Christ, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the Cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of God. Let us, therefore, run with patience the race that is set before us.

A second illustration from the ancient Olympic Games is that of -

2. BOXING:

Boxing at Olympia was a violent contest. The competitors had their hands covered with leather bands studded with nails! There was good reason for stepping aside and letting your opponent's blow strike the air! St. Paul said in I Corinthians 9:27, "So box I, not as one that beateth the air, but on the contrary,



I beat my body black and blue and lead it into slavery, into subjection." Here again the imagery suggests intensity, concentration on a definite aim. Paul's opponent in the boxing contest was his own body. The body so readily calls for ease, for self-indulgence, for self-pity. I know of some people in this Church who, with grim determination and stoical fortitude, have faced their illnesses in the strength of God. Their resolution has set them on the way to recovery.

With some it is physical sickness, but with all there is the constant fight with spiritual weakness. The body may easily take control of a person and lead him into absolute slavery. His bodily appetites or desires become the main consideration with a prior claim over everything else. It may be eating, drinking, or sex. Paul was determined that his body should be the willing, responsive servant of the spirit. "I am no shadow boxer", he says, "I really fight! I am my body's sternest master. I make it my slave."

A third illustration used in the New Testament from the ancient Olympic Games is that of -

3. WRESTLING.

Wrestling was a favourite sport among the Greeks. In Ephesians 6:12 Paul said, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood."

Colossians 1:29 (Weymouth): "To this end like an eager wrestler I exert all my strength in reliance upon the power of Him who is mightily at work within me."

I Timothy 4:10 (Moffatt): "And this is the motive of our toiling and wrestling that we have our hopes fixed on the living God, who is the Saviour of all mankind and especially of believers."

Wrestling is won partly by strength and partly by skill and cunning. We struggle with spiritual forces which are strong and subtle, abounding in the wiles and stratagems of the evil one. We are, therefore, dependent upon the power of God. Evangelism is a stern struggle. We have to compete against the brain-washing techniques of commercial advertising, the presentation of superficial caricatures of real life situations in films, the materialistic substitutes for deep satisfaction in every-day life, the

lowering of moral standards in the community, the complacency of the average Church-going person, the conservatism of the clergy, and the failure of the average Christian to trust God wholly. If we are going to be wrestlers for God and contend for the souls of men, we need to come to grips with our opponents. We can't escape out of the ring of conflict and continue the task of evangelism in peace.

If our endeavour to win others for Christ requires of us no personal struggle, no sacrificial effort, no agonising in prayer, then the rulers of the darkness of this world have obtained the count-down, spiritual wickedness in high places has won the fight and souls are lost.

But come now, join the other Christian Olympians in the great contest before us. You will need

- the speed of a runner
- the strength of a boxer
- the skill of a wrestler

Here is the running track, open at one end and rounded in a semi-circular form at the other. There is the Judge's Throne. Along the sides are the tiers of marble seats for the tens of thousands of spectators. 500 million people in a world-wide Television hook-up will watch the 1968 Olympic Games. First notice,

THE HERALDS and THE COMPETITORS:

All is excitement. The herald summons each competitor onto the running track. He announces to the spectators the rules of the contest, the name of the country of the competitor. "A herald", thought St. Paul, "that's what I am! I have summoned others to the great race. I have led them to the starting point. I have announced the rules of the game. I am a herald as well as a competitor." The work of a preacher is described in the New Testament by at least 3 significant Greek words. One means "to announce good news" - to evangelise (Acts 8:25). The second means "to testify, to bear witness" (Acts 2:40). The third means, "to proclaim as a herald" (Acts 9:20). "Of that Gospel," he said, "I have been appointed a herald". 2 Timothy 1:11.

Every Christian is to be a herald. He is to lead others on to the track, as Andrew led his own brother Peter -

as Paul led Onesimus, the runaway slave
 as Ambrose led sin-stained Augustine
 as an unknown Methodist local preacher led Spurgeon
 as a friend in a cricket ground dressing-room led Brian Booth
 as the Revd. David Sheppard led Tex Dexter to Christ
 as a prayerful parishioner of Holy Trinity led some new-comer at a Guest Service to Christ
 as a sincere speaker in a dilapidated parish hall led me
 as a young fellow to Christ;

so, every Christian is to be a herald.

To lead others into the Great Race is the most far-reaching work anyone can do on this earth, and one most dear to the heart of Him who desires all men to be saved.

But every Christian herald is still running his own race, and must watch lest pride and carelessness creep in. Timothy was warned, "Take heed to thyself, and to thy teaching." Paul himself was exercising the utmost self-mastery lest after "having heralded others" he should be disqualified himself as a competitor.

Here is a solemn warning to clergy, Sunday School teachers, Youth leaders, and those in positions of responsibility in the Church.

The Lord does not cast us away, but we may cast ourselves away. What a tragedy to see people who have begun well in the Christian life, who have shown great promise, who have been keen and humble and teachable and co-operative, gradually (not suddenly, but gradually) become castaways. They cease to be heralds- others can no longer be led on to the track by them.

Secondly, notice

THE JUDGE and THE GOAL:

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 4:7-8), "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day."

The Judge in the Christian race has his counterpart, imperfect though the comparison be, in the President of the Games. Our consolation and warning is that the final decision rests not with imperfect human critics, but with the all-seeing righteous Judge, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's mission in life "was to testify the good news of the grace of God." At the end he could say, "I have finished my course," "I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." In other words, "I go straight for the goal." The goal is to do the will of God for our lives. Remember, we must all appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Finally,

THE PRIZE and THE RULES:

In the Grecian games there was no money prize. The winner was crowned with a wreath of leaves; at Corinth, in Paul's time, a wreath of pine foliage. The winner and his family received high honour. He was given a public welcome home, and a poet celebrated his achievement with a poem. For the man and his family, it was the event of a life time.

Moffatt translates I Corinthians 9:25 - "Every athlete practises self-restraint all round, but while they do it to win a fading wreath, we do it for an unfading."

What is our prize? It is not salvation. That is a free gift at the beginning. We can never earn that. The prize is the reward at the end for the Christian determined by the way he has measured up to his responsibility for Christ. Loyal service means increased capacity, larger opportunities, greater responsibilities.

Who will get this prize? Christians who have kept the rules. 2 Timothy 2:5 (Moffatt) - "A competitor in the games is not crowned unless he observes the rules."

Are we ready to let go all that would hinder Christ's work in us, and expect Him to change us?

A Tamil Christian said, "If you would change I, I, I, into Thou, Thou, Thou, and try, try, try, into trust, trust, trust, then you would get rest, rest, rest."

Some other helpful publications to encourage Christians to be dedicated disciples of Christ:

Discipline (D24-free)

by Philip Thomas. Jesus calls us to self-denial and sacrifice, not to the soft, easy life.

Christian Liberty (D11-10c)

Malcolm Jeeves shows that Christianity offers both freedom from things that drag us down and freedom to fulfil our best potentialities.

Pilgrimage to Jerusalem (S23-15c)

Spiritual messages arising from Lance Shilton's visit to the Holy City.

A Christian in Moscow (S33-15c)

Lance Shilton calls us to support with love, prayer and discipleship our fellow Christians who are suffering under Communist regimes.

The Church in a Communist Context (D74-10c)

Lance Shilton reports on his contact with Christians behind the Iron Curtain, and brings us both encouragement and concern at their situation.

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RUNNING, BOXING, WRESTLING FOR GOD

An athlete's way of life demands training, discipline, endurance, courage. Many times Paul uses the athlete as an illustration of the qualities required of a Christian. Lance Shilton draws out these illustrations to give Christians a renewed zeal and determination to give their very best for their Lord and Master.

Recommended price 10c

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