



FIFA WORLD CUP
RUSSIA 2018

The Beautiful Game!

Occurring every four years, this World Cup (June 14 through July 15) is the twenty-first and, once more, will be the most viewed sporting event in the world. Consider that in 2014, when the event was held in Brazil, 3.2 billion people out of a world population of over 7 billion tuned in to the tournament.

Even here in America, where the trifecta of American football, basketball, and baseball predominates, the global appeal of soccer is felt more and more. (Image: courtesy of FIFA).

Who Will Win?

All over the world, *aficionados* of the game—men and women, young children, too—will be offering their opinions about who will win.

Supporters of the holders Germany, (see photo) will hope they can catch up Brazil, the five-time winner. Italians, watching from home, will hope not, since Germany would then overtake them in the number of tournament wins. Other teams sitting at home such as the United States and Holland will rue the lost opportunity to try once more for their first triumph. Meanwhile, the race goes on to become the first nation outside of South America



and Europe to win the competition. Egyptians in particular will hope Mohammed Salah, after a phenomenal season with English club Liverpool, can lead Egypt to a surprise win. (Photo: Mike Egerton/PA Images via Getty Images [www.espn.com/soccer/fifa-world-cup/4/blog/post/3433930/world-cup-2018-only-germany-brazil-argentina-france-spain-have-chance-to-win]).

Yet, all over the world, lovers of football will relish the latest and quite possibly the climactic chapter of the rivalry between Lionel Messi (Argentina) and Cristiano Ronaldo (Portugal). Repeatedly, commentators remark that we are privileged to live

in an era when two of the greatest players in the history of the game are fighting it out to be the undisputed greatest. Both of them need to lead their team to victory to settle the matter, but only one of them can. The stage is set!

Who Will Lose?

This is all good fun, for Christians, too. But, to many, football is so much more than that. It is a religion and an idol (a substitute for God). The players are the high priests, the game is the savior, the supporters are the devotees, the chants are the hymns, and the money spent on soccer merchandise the tithing. No one has understood or admitted this more than the legendary manager of Liverpool Football Club, Bill Shankly (1913–1981):

“At a football club, there’s a holy trinity: the players, the manager, and the supporters.”

“Forget the Beatles [who claimed greater popularity than Jesus] and all the rest. This is the real Liverpool sound. It’s real singing, and it’s what the Kop is all about.”

“Some people believe football is a matter of life and death . . . I can assure you that it is much, much more important than that.”

“I was only in the game for the love of football—and I wanted to bring back happiness to the people of Liverpool.”

While soccer is great as a sport, it is sinful and foolish to trust in it as a god. It is temporal, and cannot offer ultimate (i.e., deepest or eternal) meaning or satisfaction. Since God **“has put eternity into man’s heart”** (Ecclesiastes 3:11) only he, the eternal God, can fill the God-shaped cavity within us. Jesus posed the question, **“What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?”** (Mark 8:46). He asks in effect, “What does it matter if you hold the world cup in your hands as a world cup winner, if God is not filling and satisfying your heart?” Read on to learn more of how God can satisfy your heart and grant lasting purpose to your life.

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SUNDAY WORSHIP TIMES



Does God Really Have a Hand?

One particular memory of the World Cup, still talked of today, concerns the quarter-final match between England and Argentina in the *Estadio Azteca*, Mexico City, in 1986. The two goals of the great Diego Maradona, scored within four minutes of each other, revealed him in turn to be a blatant cheat and a brilliant individualist. The first goal was scored by punching the ball over the legendary keeper Peter Shilton (see the photo), the second is regarded by many as the greatest goal of the twentieth century.

For the Argentinians, this was small payback for the loss of the Falklands War four years earlier. Understandably, England was outraged by the injustice. The Bulgarian linesman later admitted he saw the handball, but the referee did not seek his opinion. Maradona stoked the ire by claiming of the first goal that it was scored “a little with the head of Maradona and a little with the hand of God,” and ironically has since stated that he could not have scored the second had not the English been so gentlemanly. Other teams, he believed, would have committed a “professional foul” to stop him from scoring. Whatever the opinions, Argentina went on to win the Mexico World Cup. Such is life in a fallen world!



Yet, Maradona’s facetious explanation is not without its lessons.

Note, first, his presumption that God exists. Maradona’s invoking of God in a climate of secularism, reminds us that no matter how much we propagate the idea that God does not exist, we shall never be able to rid ourselves of God. The Bible tells us why. God has etched ineradicably the knowledge of his existence on the constitution of our beings (Romans 1:18-21). When we claim God does not exist it is with our hearts rather than with our heads (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). In other words, we have an ulterior motive for claiming God’s nonexistence (e.g., a broken heart, a bitter experience, a safeguarding of personal autonomy). Says the apostle Paul, by nature we suppress the truth of God’s existence *in unrighteousness*. Maradona reminds us, however, that we can only do so for so long. As with the ball we’ll try to hold under water this summer, theism (belief in the existence of God) pops up either in hyped-up protests of atheism (as in “me thinks you protest too much”) or in distortions such as polytheism (the worship of many gods).

Second, Maradona reminds us that God speaks to us. Since he is so much greater than we are, he speaks in language we can understand. This we call God’s “baby talk.” In particular, when God speaks of himself, he uses what we call anthropomor-

phisms. This is to say that he speaks of himself as in human form. God does not have a hand, but he speaks as if he does to convey in ways we understand, and to the extent he reveals, how he operates and the message of good news he has for us. Of course, it is nonsense that God would use his hand (i.e., his power) to help Maradona cheat. God only uses his hand, so to speak, consistent with his holy, just, and loving character and purposes.

Third, Maradona unwittingly reminds us that we need the hand of God to help us in life. God’s hand may not score unjust goals, but it does plenty else. In fact, a study of the hand of God in the Bible teaches us how we may come to know God. The apostle Peter urges us to, “**humble ourselves . . . under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you**” (I Peter 5:6). This is the first step in getting to know God. The Bible

encourages us to take it: “**The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against those who forsake him**” (Ezra 8:22). We seek God on account of our sins and the way they have separated us from God. Yet, Isaiah reminds us, “**the LORD’s hand is not shortened that it cannot save, or his ear dull**

that it cannot hear” (Isaiah 59:1). (Photo: Getty [www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/international/30-years-of-hurt-englands-untold-stories-behind-maradonas-hand-of-god-a7087806.html]).

This great salvation comes to those placing their trust in Jesus Christ. Jesus was God’s hand on earth. He alone could stretch out his human hand and declare with authority to the forlorn, “**be clean**” (Matthew 8:3). Perhaps, you have come to realize that this is your greatest need. Come to Christ in prayer then, trusting him to cleanse you from your sins. Whether you come, like Maradona, from a religious background, or from one that is irreligious, we all need this cleansing from God. We cannot enter heaven without it.

This idea of entrusting your life to the hand of God may be new to you and unnerving. Listen to the assurance Jesus gives to those who do so: “**I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand**” (John 10:28). There’s no better place to be than in God’s hand! Have you discovered this yet? Read next of how Cyrille Regis found this out. (Photo: Bethany, Cheung Chau, Hong Kong [www.bethanyhk.org/]).





England International Cyrille Regis MBE, 1958–2018

He was a boyhood hero. I didn't hear him interviewed much, and he didn't play for my team, but I was in awe of his physique, his skill, his speed, his strength, and his goals. Charged with not scoring enough scrappy ones, he is remembered for his spectacular efforts, notably his 1981-1982 goal-of-the-season, scored for West Bromwich Albion against Norwich City. Receiving the ball on his chest after the half-way line, he turned his man, ran with the ball fifteen yards or so, before rifling the ball from thirty yards or so into the top right-hand corner of the net. The goalkeeper had no chance. (Photo: www.crossrhythms.co.uk/articles/life/Cyrille_Regis_An_Iconic_Footballer_Tells_His_Story/42404/p1/).

Regis seemed to have gained everything. Although his parents—a fisherman and seamstress—had migrated from French Guiana, Regis had worked in the U.K. as an electrician, playing part-time in a lower league before signing for top-tier club West Bromwich Albion. For all his strength, he came across as a gentle giant, and not without the looks which, combined with his celebrity status and earnings, made him a hit with the ladies.



But Regis didn't have everything. Although he became the third black player (as they say there) to represent England (1982-1987), he lost out on many more caps for his country. Then, in July 1989, he lost his friend, fellow professional footballer Laurie Cunningham, to a car crash. Cunningham, had been one of the affectionately nicknamed "The Three Degrees" (along with Regis and Brendon Batson) who played together for West Bromwich Albion, blazing a trail for black players. Eventually, Regis also lost his marriage to Beverley through the effects of his earlier infidelities. (Photo: www.EnglandFootballOnline.com/TeamPlayersBios/PlayersR/BioRegisC.html).

Regis' losses, notably of Cunningham, left him insecure and devastated. Two years earlier they had been together in a car crash. Thus, when Cunningham died, Regis began asking the most important questions of life: Is there life after death? Where is God in all of this? Why did this happen? Cyrille's search for answers led him to attend church, Yet, neither Christian values nor church attendance and its practices could give

him the peace he needed.

Regis explains that in his reading of the book the minister gave him—Michael Green's *A New Dimension*—the lights began to go on in his dark world. He recalled: "As I'm reading this book, the penny drops. It really sinks in that Christ loves me. He died for me and He rose again from the dead and this awesome sense of peace comes over me." Put more briefly, Regis experienced as all true seekers of God have found, "a real encounter with Jesus." This encounter would change his life forever.

Regis quickly came to understand that while our works do not save us from our sins, Christians are nevertheless called to serve Jesus, their Lord and Saviour. In Ephesians 2:8-10 Paul states:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

While Regis continued his playing career, eventually retiring in 1996 after 614 domestic games (scoring 158 goals), he now possessed a greater affection than for the game he loved.

Soon he got involved with *Christians in Sport*. Upon hanging up his boots, he became a player's agent, but also supported Water Aid, specifically advancing water projects in Ethiopia. Still wrestling with temptation (as Christians do), he married a Christian, Julia, with whose help he became a role model for his children and grandchildren. In 2008, he became a Member of the Order of the British Empire and, in 2011, a member of the board of trustees of *Christians in Sport*. (Photo: PA [www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2018/01/15/former-west-brom-striker-cyrille-regis-dies-aged-59/]).



Regis never lost out for receiving the love and forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ. Rather, he gained a highest and a lasting purpose in serving God and in sharing Jesus' message of hope:

"I meet people all the time, some famous, some not who are all looking for hope and peace. I have learned that money cannot buy peace of mind so I simply tell people how I found hope and peace in God. The great thing about it is that anyone can have the peace that I have, you just need to know God."

God took Cyrille home to heaven this year. His death was mourned by the footballing world. It is said he changed hearts and minds. I suspect that Cyrille would say that only Christ can do that. He had known his transforming grace, and would have you know it, too. You will not be the loser for humbly seeking God for forgiveness and a life pleasing to him!

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LET US PRAY!

Father in heaven,

It is by your power and pleasure that we live! You have appointed the day and place we occupy, and have given us our blessings. In you we live, move, and have our being!

You have made us in your image, have given us a sense of eternity, and have written your law on our hearts. We know then, that while your gifts of earthly pleasure abound—our health, homes, family, friends, talents, and opportunities—our ultimate pleasure is found not in these, but in you.

Help us then to realize how valuable are our souls. That were we to have all of that for which we could wish, without you in our lives they are empty and our futures are bleak, for none of our dreams contain ultimate fulfillment, The idols we make, to substitute for you, all fail.

Direct our thoughts, we pray, to the lasting joy, deep-seated peace, and eternal hope found alone in your ultimate gift of Christ. Enable us to repent to you for the misuse of our lives to date, and to believe that because of Christ's taking on himself the penalty of sin due to us, we may start life again, as a new creation. In receiving him as our Savior and Lord, show us your unrivaled glory and greatness, and help us, we pray, to love our gifts short of idolizing them.

For all this we humbly pray, in Jesus' name. Amen (meaning literally, "So let it be").

“. . . Without faith it is impossible to please him [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

Hebrews 11:6



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