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THE OLYMPICS RESCHEDULED

In a world divided between east and west, right and left, conservative and progressive, and religious and irreligious, the Olympics reminds us that we are one race, capable of jointly celebrating human skill and endurance. Occurring a year late due to COVID, this summer's Tokyo Olympics have been a mix of excitement and skepticism.

Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), announcing in March 2020 the deferment, put the best face on it: "Humankind currently finds itself in a dark tunnel. These Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 can be a light at the end of this tunnel." By the time you read this, we shall know! Regardless, their history suggests the games can outlast COVID.

THE ANCIENT OLYMPICS

The earliest Olympics take us back at least as far as 776 B.C., to Olympia on the coast of the Peloponnesian peninsula. The Greeks believed that the Olympics were founded by Heracles, son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene, in honor of Zeus, the greatest god of the Greek pantheon.

The Olympics began as a single event, a two-hundred-yard dash. The *stadion*, as it became known, was won by a cook, Coroebus of Elis. At that time, only men, freeborn male citizens of Greece, could race. Married women were barred from attending. Yet, the Olympics began expanding when warlike Spartans entered the 18th Olympiad, extending its events to wrestling and the Pentathlon (foot race, long jump, discus, javelin, and wrestling). Gradually, the Olympics grew to a five-day event, and became the most famous Greek sporting festival. Lasting from August 6 to September 19, it was held every four years.

The Romans took over the Olympics from the Greeks, but under their oversight, its quality deteriorated. In one Olympiad, Emperor Nero entered the chariot race, declaring himself the winner even though he had fallen out of

his chariot. Yet, alongside the growing decadence of Rome there was emerging the influence of Christianity. By the fourth century, Christianity was not only recognized, but became the official faith of the empire. Thus, in 393 A.D. Emperor Theodosius I, a professing Christian, abolished the Olympics due to their association with paganism. This does not mean to say, however, that Christians oppose sport.

THE MODERN OLYMPICS

The Olympics went unrevived for fifteen hundred years. Yet a young French baron, Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937), dedicated to physical education, having visited the ancient site of Olympas, began promoting a fresh start (Photo: Britannica.com).



In 1894 the IOC was formed. The first modern Olympics were held, significantly, in Athens in 1896. Spectators numbered 60,000 and athletes (all male) 280, representing 12 nations in 43 events. By the 1920 Antwerp Olympics an official flag had been created with white background and five hoops representing the continents of North and South America, Asia, Africa, Europe, and Australia. The modern Olympics continued the tradition of meeting every four years, although the World Wars prohibited their meeting in 1916, and in 1940 and 1944.

THE PARALYMPICS

No development better encapsulates the Olympic spirit than the Paralympics. The London Olympics of 1948 were significant not only because they restarted the games following World War II, but because of neurologist Dr. Ludwig Guttmann's organizing for injured war veterans a games at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury, England. Running parallel with the Olympics, from humble beginnings (16 athletes competing in archery), The Stoke Mandeville Games quickly grew in competitors and international representation. By the 1960 Rome Olympics, they became known as the Paralympics, and had 400 participants from 23 countries. What fortitude they manifest!

So much for Olympic history. Now for a review of it.

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THE OLYMPICS REVIEWED

The Olympics are a grand idea, grander than either the Greeks or the moderns knew. In short, they point us to the greatness of God.

THE OLYMPICS AS A LESSON

With their emphasis on physical exercise, the Olympics remind us that God made us with bodies as well as souls. While athletes yearn to hone them and their skills, spectators watch on amazed at their drive combined with extraordinary feats with weights, speed, heights, and accuracy. Although incapable of matching the athletes, spectators, too, are made in the image of our great Creator. Hence their appreciation of athletic creativity.

Television has broadened no end our race's fascination with new records and new sports. Now a global event, the Olympics attest the essential unity of our race. What one athlete accomplishes we all accomplish, for we are of the same race. His or her world record is ours as a race. The haul of medals one nation stacks up we all accumulate.

THE OLYMPICS AS A LONGING

Ironically, it was in Greece and to the Athenians that the apostle Paul aired the reality and purpose of our racial unity.

[God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us [Acts of the Apostles 17:26-27].

The call to seek God arose from our sin. Sin explains our racial disharmony and so much else. The Olympics falter in overcoming this, nevertheless they point us to God.

Note how the ancients, in dedicating the Olympics to Zeus, indicated their knowledge of a divinity greater than themselves. Yet, conceived in sin (Psalm 51:5), suppressing the true God revealed in nature (Rom. 1:18-23), but unable to eradicate the knowledge of God that he has inscribed on our constitutions, they concocted the idea of Zeus. He was their explanation for thunder and lightning. Yet, as a human invention, Zeus inevitably reflected our flaws, notably by his rocky marriage to Hera and by his extramarital philandering with women human and divine.



By the modern Olympics, the polytheism of the ancient world had given way to post-Enlightenment irreligion in the West. Soon it was to receive state support in Communist lands. In the process, athletes became the gods, for fallen man, remaining religious, turns the created into

the Creator. Man, though, can never replace God. Athletes are great entertainers but poor gods. They crash and burn. Recall Canadian sprinter, Ben Johnson, and his repeat drug offenses. Only God lives up to being God.

THE OLYMPICS AS A LIGHT

It is because of man's fall that the Olympics can only and ever be "a light." Their glory is fleeting and easily overshadowed. The Munich



Olympics (1972), seeking to bury the memory of Hitler's 1936 Berlin Olympics, witnessed the killings of seventeen in an appallingly handled Palestinian (PLO) attack on Israeli athletes. During the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, Eric Rudolph set off a bomb in the Centennial Olympic Park, killing a spectator and wounding III. Protesting against abortion on demand, he reminds us that we need salvation from self-righteousness as well as from unrighteousness. (Photo: Associated Press.)

That salvation comes alone through Jesus Christ, the light of the world (John 8:12). In running the race of the ages, he, like an athlete, eyed the finishing tape, setting his face to go to Jerusalem (Isaiah 50:7; Luke 9:51). There, he bore a weight no weightlifter could jerk, an incomparable load of human sin and guilt. In dying for it, he shot an arrow through Satan that no archer could match. His reward was neither laurel, gold medal, nor temporal fame, but an eternal exaltation: *"the author and perfecter of our faith, . . . for the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God"* (Hebrews 12:2).

THE OLYMPICS AS A LIFE

Although it is by Christ's exertions alone that we are saved from our sins, the apostle Paul drew from the athletics of his day to teach those of us believing in Christ that we also have a race to run. Whereas Christ ran to gain us our salvation, we run out of gratitude to please God and to fulfill his will for our lives.

Whether Paul had in mind the Olympics or the Isthmian games held every two years near Corinth, he saw in the athletes' disciplined training a sense of what Christians need to race well. Since athletes submit themselves to considerable self-control for the sake of a perishable prize, how much, reasons Paul, ought we for one that is imperishable (I Corinthians 9:24-27)? We are not aimless, *"not box[ing] as one beating the air,"* but single-minded, pursuing the prize of God. We don't cheat, as did Nero, but compete by the rules. Paul was sincere, testifying at the end of his life: *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness"* (2 Timothy 2:5; 4:7-8a).

THE OLYMPICS REEVALUATED

Perhaps no Olympian held the Olympics in better and more consistent perspective than Eric Liddell (1902–1945). He understood that while neither God nor the Christian oppose bodily care and use, our interest in sport is to be set in a higher and broader context. Not that of the mythical gods of the ancient Olympics, nor of the deification of man (as in the tendency of modern and postmodern sport), but that of the one true God revealed in nature and known through Jesus Christ.

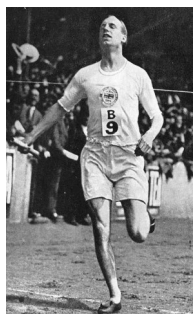
Liddell, then, captured the balance of the apostle Paul. On the one hand, Paul acknowledged that *“bodily exercise profits,”* but added that, ultimately, it profits *“little”* (1 Timothy 4:8). His intent was not to demean the body, but to afford the welfare of the soul its due. Paul was in great company. Jesus had earlier posed the question, *“what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but forfeits his life [literally, his soul]?”* (Matthew 16:26; cf. Mark 8:36).

THE FLYING SCOTSMAN

Born in Tsientsin, China, to Scottish Congregationalist missionaries operating through the London Missionary Society, Eric came to faith in Christ early in his life. Following early schooling he was sent with his older brother Rob out of the antireporter and anti-Christian context of China to Eltham College near London where missionary children were often educated.

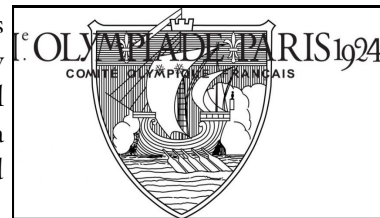
Although away from his parents, Eric’s devotion to Christ became apparent in his character and in his visitation of the sick. But it also became clear that Eric had a giftedness in sport, winning the Blackheath Cup as Athlete of the Year and was captain of both the school’s rugby and cricket teams. Once a student of Pure Science, he represented the University of Edinburgh in athletics, setting a British record of 9.7 seconds in the 100-yard sprint at the AAA Championships. He was also capped 7 times by the Scottish rugby team, during the Five Nations (1924 and 1925).

As the fastest runner in Scotland, Liddell qualified for the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris. But learning that the qualifiers for the sprint, his best event, were on the Sunday, the Lord’s Day, he began training for the 440-yard event.



Sure enough, against media and (high-) societal pressure, he refused to compromise. Gaining a bronze medal in the 220-yard final, he made it to the final of his weaker event, the 440-yard race. Before the race, he received from one of the team masseurs a folded piece of paper: *“In the old book it says: ‘He that honours me I will honour.’* [1 Samuel 2:30] Wishing

you the best of success always.” The rest, as they say, is history. Liddell won the race, setting a new European record which stood for 12 years.



After the Olympics, Liddell continued to run, remaining Scottish champion, believing that the Christian’s body as well as his soul is to be utilized for the glory of God. “I believe God made me for a purpose,” he testified, “but he also made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure.” Later he went on to say, “since I have been a young lad, I have had my eyes on a different prize. You see, each of us is in a greater race than any I have run in Paris, and this race ends when God gives out the medals”

THE DYING SAINT

Liddell’s consciousness of the call of God led him back to China. Having begun to speak for the Lord while at university, he entered training for missions at the Scottish Congregationalist College, envisioning a life loving God, teaching English, and ministering to the poor. However, the London Missionary Society assigned him the role of teaching the sons of the elite at the Anglo-Chinese College in the city of his birth.

In 1931–32, Liddell returned to Scotland to be ordained, aiming to formally preach God’s Word in China and to baptize new Christians into the church. Shortly after returning, he married a Canadian trainee nurse, Florence MacKenzie. They were blessed with three daughters.

Increasingly, tensions increased in China as the Japanese imperial forces encroached further into the country. Following Pearl Harbor and the Japanese-German alliance, the British government advised nationals to leave, Flo left for Canada, pregnant with their third daughter. By that time, Eric had been sent by the missionary society to the region of Xiaozhang. There he served with his brother Rob at a medical station, earning the respect of the community, showing the love of Christ not only to the Chinese, but, to the astonishment of the locals, to Japanese soldiers as well.

In 1943, Liddell was expelled from Xiaozhang by the Japanese and was interned with fellow Christians from the China Inland Mission in Weih sien Internment Camp. There he taught Bible classes, helped the elderly, and taught science to the children. Yet, in 1945, he died of a brain tumor, made worse by overwork and malnutrition. He was buried in the garden behind the Japanese officers’ quarters. According to a fellow missionary, his final words were, “It’s complete surrender.” Yet, he could say with Paul, *“I did not run in vain”* (Phil. 2:16).

Residential Address:

THE OLYMPICS REMEMBERED

With great anticipation many have awaited the Olympics, but as with any gratification, they quickly pass. That said, the next Olympics, Paris in 2024, are but three years away. In the meantime, the embracing of the supreme lessons of the Olympics for this life and the next are vastly more important than endless replays of the Tokyo highlights.

Note, first, that God, whose existence we understand yet suppress (Psalm 14:1; 53:1), not only created us as bodies and souls, but offers a salvation which redeems both. We who confess our sins to God and trust that Christ suffered for us their penalty on the cross, are promised in this life the cleansing and renewal of our souls, and at Jesus' return the resurrection and empowerment of our bodies.

Second, God's offer of a salvation for our whole persons can only be received by embracing a whole Christ. The person who knows and feels their need of God's grace does not stand in judgment over Christ, picking whether to receive him as their Savior and Lord or just as their Savior. Rather, in profound gratitude for the race he has run for us through the pain and shame of the cross, we humbly receive all of him, and, through his merit and resurrection power, run a race in worship, holiness, and service for the sake of God's glory.

Third, it follows that the race we run is not *for* our salvation but *from* it. Just as the athlete is inspired by parents and guardians who ran them around for years on end for training and race meets, and by sponsors who purchased their equipment, so the Christian is inspired to live for God who, in Christ, says hymnist Elvina Hall, "paid it all."

Fourth, the Christian, like the athlete, not only looks back to where his racing began, but forward to the prize. There's one for the believer, too! Christ earned his by the merit of his righteous life and the obedience of his atoning death. We receive ours through grace, for our privilege of running and the ability to run well is all of God!

Head, then, to Christ's cross. That's where your race begins!

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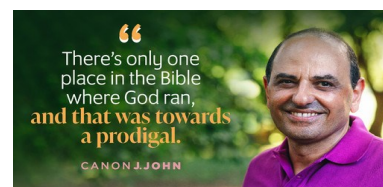
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