

The Lessons We Can Learn From Olympians to Run Our Own Spiritual Race

My wife recorded almost all of the recent Winter Olympics and we are still trying to see every exciting moment. Some of the athletes experienced tears of joy, while others experienced tears of disappointment. Some collapsed in physical exhaustion or pain, while others concluded with thrills of happiness and fulfillment.

While we watched as distant, virtual spectators, I couldn't help but reflect on scriptural principles and spiritual lessons, which we all should acknowledge and apply to our own very real lives and spiritual races.

Suffering Saints

After the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and the rapid growth of followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, persecution arose and one of the gifted lay-leaders named Stephen was stoned and martyred (Acts 7). The saints in that holy fellowship suffered persecution, religious threats and social harassment. Eventually, many believers were driven from the Jerusalem area and scattered "everywhere preaching the word" (8:1-4, NKJV).

In Acts 13, Spirit-filled and gifted leaders Barnabas and Saul were sent out from the "Christians" in Antioch of Syria on an ordained mission to the Jews on the island of Cyprus and then to Jewish communities in Asia Minor (Turkey today). Jewish leaders became jealous of the crowds these "missionaries" (sent ones) drew and eventually rejected them and their message of Jesus, the Messiah. But many Gentiles gladly received the word of the Lord throughout the region (chapter 14).

Barnabas and Saul had an effective ministry in the towns but faced persecution and violence, as Paul was even stoned in Lystra and left for dead. But God raised him up and they continued on to Derbe, where they also preached the gospel “and made many disciples” (14:21).

They had added ministry on their return trip to Antioch by visiting the “baby believers” in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch (of Pisidia), “...strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God’” (14:22).

Today, as well as then, believers become “saints” when God *imputes* the righteousness of His Son, Jesus, into them at salvation. But they need to be strengthened in their journey of faith by other believers and instructed in the ways of the Lord by gifted leaders. The Holy Spirit progressively *imparts* His holiness and grace to growing believers, as they enter into the life of the kingdom of God. This happens through many hardships, sufferings and “tribulations” (v. 22).

Our Present Troubles and Trials

The word tribulation means pressure, trials, distress and frustration. Jesus said:

“... In the world, you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33)

Jesus has conquered these trials, hardships and sufferings for His saints! We must learn to apply the promised victories over our temporal troubles, knowing that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

We must learn to embrace the trials of our journeys and not seek to escape them. This doesn’t mean we passively accept them but that we wisely see our pains, limitations and trials in light of a bigger objective—that of the will of God and for

His kingdom. As the writer to the scattered early Messianics said, "... let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1).

Later, after two other missionary journeys, fraught with other hardships and sufferings, the apostle Paul testified that:

"...none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).

In Paul's final exhortation to his partner and student, Timothy, he again remembered the patient endurance he had gained for the race he had run:

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7).

Enduring Faith

The apostle James, the earthly half-brother of our Lord Jesus, says:

"Consider it wholly joyful, my brethren, whenever you are enveloped in or encounter trials of any sort or fall into various temptations" (James 1:2, AMPC).

These tests and trials may be seen as outward adversities, which James advises that we ... consider as causes for a joyful response. This is not a normal reaction to negative circumstances. Instead, it calls for deliberate, intellectual and spiritual decisions on our part that are only possible from a godly, kingdom-focused perspective.

The trial or temptation is a test of our faith and will demonstrate our endurance, steadfastness and patience. Spiritual growth will enable us to stand up under the pressure of adversity, proving the genuineness of our faith.

In the face of tests and trials, our developed faith will produce in us right living, right motives, right thinking and right relationships. On our road to Christian maturity, our Lord Jesus will give us the grace we need for the race He sets before us.

“Happy is the man who doesn’t give in and do wrong when he is tempted, for afterwards he will get as his reward the crown of life that God has promised those who love him” (James 1:12, TLB). {eoa}

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