

Called to Be a Winner

Printed Text: 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:13

Background Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:13.

Devotional Reading: Hebrews 12:1-12.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

²⁴ 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. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ² They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³ They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." ⁸ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. ⁹ We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. ¹⁰ And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. ¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

Introduction

At the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, John Stephen Akhwari, a runner from Tanzania, finished dead last in the marathon. Injured along the way, Akhwari hobbled into the nearly empty stadium an hour after the last runner had crossed the finish line. The official filmmaker for the games, Bud Greenspan, asked the athlete why he put himself through so much pain to finish the race. Akhwari replied, "My country did not send me 5000 miles to start the race. They sent me to finish it!" (Roper, *Out of the Ordinary*, Discovery House). When we trusted in Christ, we began the Christian race. Like the African runner, we entered the race not merely to begin it but to

finish it! Therefore it is imperative that we persevere to the end. The Christian life is not a quick sprint but a long-distance marathon! To successfully finish, we must "lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and ... run with patience the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Restate the positive and negative examples that Paul gives regarding following through to the end.
2. Draw one parallel between the ancient Israelites' experiences in the wilderness and the challenges of modern Christian life.
3. Plan to overcome a specific temptation.

Our Efforts (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

Since the Corinthians would have been familiar with both the ancient Olympic and Isthmian games that occurred in Greece, Paul used illustrations from athletics to press home his point. Although the ancient Greek games had few events compared to the modern Olympics, races were always prominent. As in all races, there is only one runner who receives the blue ribbon or the gold medal. "Run in such a way as to get the prize." (v. 24), said Paul. In short, run to win! All those entering the Christian race should strive to cross the finish line. A similar thought is found in Philippians: "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (3:14).

1. What two athletic illustrations did Paul use to depict the Christian life (1 Corinthians 9:24)?

Some people go to great lengths in an effort to become famous or even merely popular. Others are willing to pour overwhelming energy into their vocation in an effort to obtain promotions or "self-fulfillment." The pursuit of our culture's status symbols-bigger houses, luxury boats, impressive cars, designer clothing, and the latest electronic gadgets-frequently dominates even the lives of God's people. The pursuit of expertise in various hobbies can essentially become the pursuit of a fading crown. The pursuit of certain relationships can fall into this category.

Perspective is one key to proper focus. For example, the desire for a _____ can be examined with the prayerful question, "Why do I really think I need a _____?" Beware of the danger of rationalizing!

2. What are some examples of modern "prizes" that we are tempted to pursue that pale in comparison with what is available through Christ? How do we keep a proper focus?

As in modern sports, ancient athletes had to be "temperate" (v. 25), or self-controlled, in order to prepare for their chosen event. Those unwilling to enter such strict training would prove unsuccessful.

The ancient athlete was willing to commit to such self-discipline for a mere earthly reward, "a crown that will not last" (v. 25). The winner was awarded a simple wreath-crown that would

quickly fade and become brittle. Even the gold medal of the modern Olympics will eventually be burned up (2 Pet. 3:10).

As Christians, we are running a race to receive an "*a crown that will last forever*" (1 Cor. 9:25). As saints, our calling is to "*a crown that will last forever.*" (1 Peter 1:4).

3. How was an ancient athlete "temperate" (v. 25)?

One similarity is the single-minded focus required for success. Becoming a world class athlete in many sports is a full-time job. Similarly, our development as disciples requires that we make spiritual issues the highest of priorities. The physical and mental exertion required to develop athletically is paralleled by the extreme effort required for spiritual maturity. We are sometimes lulled into thinking that Christian maturity can come without great effort. But Paul describes the process as very hard work.

But there is a pitfall: a few people focus so much on being spiritually minded that they no longer are able to "connect with" the unsaved. Shuffling off to join a monastery (house for monks), either physically or just in one's thoughts, doesn't help!

4. What are some additional similarities between the Christian life and athletics that can help us live faithfully for God? Which similarity do you find to be most important? What hidden dangers are there?

Using himself as an example, Paul said that he was not like a man running aimlessly. He sought to stay on course and not become distracted by those things that might pull him off the chosen path (cf. 2 Tim. 4:7). Changing the figure from running to boxing, Paul said that he was not merely shadowboxing, either. He was attempting to land blows where they would count.

As all athletes know, the human body must be brought into subjection. The body may want food or drink that may not be best for athletic training. The body may want to stay up late when it needs rest. The body may want to quit when the coach says to go on. So it is in the Christian life. The believer must live a life of self-discipline. "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" (Mark 8:34), Jesus said.

Even though Paul had "preached to others" (1 Cor. 9:27), he knew that he had to persevere to the end; otherwise, he might become "*be disqualified.*" This word meant rejected, or not standing the test.

Paul is not only a Christian preacher; he is also one who plays in the game. That is, he not only preached the Gospel but he also lived by the Gospel's rules. True Christians, while confident of God's sovereign grace, are nevertheless conscious of their own battle against sin" (Barker and Kohlenberger). Their Examples (1 Corinthians 10:1-5)

5. What did Paul mean when he said he wanted to avoid being a "castaway" (v. 27)?

Having encouraged faithfulness by using athletic illustrations, Paul now turns to the example of Israel to stress the same point.

Although many of the Corinthians were Gentiles, it was appropriate to refer to the ancient Israelites as "our fathers" (v. 1). There is a continuity between the Old Testament saints and New Testament believers. Indeed, those who trust in Christ are "*Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise*" (Galatians 3:29).

After the ten plagues were visited on Egypt, Moses led the Israelites out of bondage and on their journey toward the Promised Land. "The Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night" (Exodus 13:21). The first major obstacle on the journey was the Red Sea. At God's command, Moses lifted his rod, the sea parted, and the people passed through on dry land. "*The waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left*" (Exod. 14:22).

That the people of Israel were "*baptized into Moses*" (1 Cor. 10:2) simply means that they submitted themselves to the authority and leadership of Moses. Similarly, those who trust in Christ submit to His authority by being obedient followers of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20). As the Hebrews were "*baptized into Moses*" under the old covenant (1 Cor. 10:2), so those rescued from spiritual bondage under the new covenant are "*baptized into Christ*" (Gal. 3:27). Christian baptism portrays what the blood of Christ performs (Romans 6:3-4).

6. How was Israel "baptized into Moses" (1 Corinthians 10:2)? How does this relate to Christian baptism?

Once they passed through the Red Sea, the Hebrews found themselves in the wilderness. During their long and difficult journey, they relied on God to provide them with both food and drink. While God sustained them physically, they were also being spiritually nourished.

The "*spiritual rock*" (v. 4) that accompanied them on this journey was Christ Himself. While we often think of Christ in terms of His earthly ministry, we must not forget that He is the eternal Son of God, who preexisted with the Father (John 1:1-3; Phil. 2:5-8; Heb. 1:1-3).

Although the Israelites had the very presence of God as they journeyed toward the Promised Land, "*God was not pleased with most of them*" (1 Cor. 10:5). Consequently, the vast majority of those rescued from Egyptian bondage never saw the Promised Land (cf. Heb. 3:16-19).

The application for the Corinthian church was clear. Just because they had trusted in Christ and were baptized (Acts 18:8) did not mean they had arrived at the end of the journey. Like the children of Israel in the wilderness, they were facing many trials and temptations along the journey. In their arrogance, they may have assumed that they were above sin (1 Cor. 10:12). As with the well-trained athlete (9:25,27), though, perseverance and diligence are necessary to complete the race (Phil. 3:12-14).

7. Who was the "spiritual Rock" (v. 4) that accompanied Israel in the wilderness?

Our Task (1 Corinthians 10:6-13)

Although we are no longer under the old covenant (Rom. 6:14), there are many examples in the Old Testament that are helpful to Christians. More often than not, these examples tell us what not

to do. Paul selected four examples (or warnings) from the wilderness experience of Israel to encourage the Corinthians to faithfully and patiently endure.

The first example was a warning against idolatry. The incident alluded to was when Aaron made the golden calf (Exod. 32:1-6). Those unwilling to repent were slain by the Levites, and about three thousand perished (v. 28).

The second example was the Israelites' fornication with the daughters of Moab (Num. 25:1-9). Because of this sin, God brought a plague upon the people that resulted in the deaths of more than 23,000 people in a single day.

The third example was when the people became impatient and began to speak against God and Moses. They said, "*Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!*" (Numbers 21:5). Because of their complaining, God sent "*fiery serpents*" (v. 6), or poisonous snakes, among the people, many of whom perished. Only by looking with faith on the bronze serpent erected by Moses could the people be healed (Num. 21:9; cf. John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32).

Although there were several occasions when the people murmured (or grumbled) against Moses, the fourth example used by Paul probably referred to Korah's rebellion (Num. 16). Besides the earth opening up and swallowing the rebellious leaders (vs. 31-33), over 14,000 were killed by a plague (vs. 49). The "*destroyer*" (1 Cor. 10:10) is likely a reference to a destroying angel (cf. 2 Sam. 24:16-17; 2 Kings 19:35). Significantly, the examples selected by Paul as warnings to the Corinthian church paralleled some of the very problems they were facing.

8. What four examples did Paul give from the wilderness journey (vs. 6-10)?

The things that had happened to ancient Israel in the wilderness "happened unto them for ensamples." "Ensamples" is an archaic spelling of the word "examples." The Greek word here is a form of the word *tupos*, which is also used in verse 6.

These Old Testament examples have come down to us for the purpose of "admonition" (1 Cor. 10:11), or warning. Those who are unwilling to learn from the past are destined to repeat those mistakes again. Many people think that they are strong. But this complacency leads them to become careless and undisciplined, leaving them unprepared to resist temptation. If the Corinthians would not receive this instruction, they were headed for spiritual disaster. The phrase "upon whom the ends of the world are come" indicates that the warnings of the past find their fulfillment in the present. That is, they are relevant for those living in this current age.

9. Why did Paul warn the Corinthians about falling (vs. 11,12)?

This verse is one of the great promises of the Bible. First, no temptation, trial, or test that we face is unique. While we may sometimes feel that we are the only person facing a particular trial or temptation, this is not true.

The temptations and tribulations we face are "*what is common to mankind*," that is, they are the kinds of things all of us experience. To be sure, not every person will be tested in the same way, but we all are tempted.

Since Christ *"has been tempted in every way, just as we are"* (Hebrews 4:15), we can be confident that He fully understands the plight of human beings. Since *"God is faithful"* (1 Cor. 10:13), He will not allow us to be tempted beyond our strength to resist. In the midst of temptation we may not think this to be true, but it is. Therefore, we cannot blame Satan or others when we succumb to temptation. If we sin, it is because we choose to do so.

God also promises that with each temptation there is an escape route. Just as there are doors into temptation, so too there are doors out. Of course, Satan will try to make the temptation so attractive that we may not be looking for a way out. Like Christ (Luke 4:1-13), we must use the *"sword of the Spirit"* (Eph. 6:17), *"the word of God"* to gain victory over the devil.

10. How is God faithful to us when we are experiencing temptation (v. 13)?

Conclusion:

Lost in a Moment Several years ago, NASCAR driver Steve Park was involved in a serious accident when his steering wheel came off. The doors on race cars do not open, so drivers must crawl in and out of the vehicle through a window. To make this easier the cars are equipped with removable steering wheels.

Park's accident occurred during a caution period in a race, when the cars move slowly around the track. While he cannot remember exactly what happened, it seems that Park turned his head momentarily as another vehicle approached on his left. In that split second, his steering wheel somehow detached. Park's car veered suddenly and was broadsided by the passing car. Someone at some point had not securely fastened the steering wheel. That momentary loss of focus could have cost Park his life!

When Paul compares the Christian life with a race, he does not mean to encourage a competitive spirit. He means to stress our need to be prepared and vigilant at all times. Unfortunately, we usually do not know when trials and temptations will crop up; they often seem to come when we least expect them or are least prepared to deal with them. T

he danger may be greatest when we feel the strongest, because at these moments a false sense of security may lead us to drop our guard. We therefore are on the alert constantly. We discipline ourselves spiritually so that we will be ready for any challenge that comes our way.

Prayer:

God, please give us the discipline and focus to remain pure in an evil world. Help us to keep focused on the prize ahead, and help us to draw on Your strength to endure temptations. Help us also to understand that You are a holy God and that You have called us to be a holy people for You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember:

Stay focused and disciplined to win life's race!