

PAUL AT ISTHMIAN GAMES IN CORINTH

Going for the Gold: The Apostle Paul and the Isthmian Games

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A sport shoe company ran an ad during the 1996 Olympics, with the line, 'You do not win the silver medal, you lose the gold!' That is the essence of athletic competition.

The legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, Vince Lombardi, tried to instill this winning attitude in his football players when he said, "Winning is not everything, it is the only thing."

The epitaph of a boxer named Agathos Daimon, from Alexandria Gerand-Jean 1964: 185-187 found on a funerary monument at Olympia in Greece said:

Here he died boxing in the stadium
Having prayed to Zeus for a wreath
or death. Age 35. Farewell.

He went for the gold and died trying to win it Milavic 1992: 11; Gerand-Jean 1964.

The Apostle Paul described the Christian life in terms of athletic metaphors. His goal was to win the "race" of Christian life, not to lose it Phil. 3:12-14; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Tim. 4:6-8. He died winning it!

Paul at Corinth

Luke does not explicitly state why Paul went to Corinth during his second missionary journey Acts 18. However, the discerning Bible student, knowing the historical-geography of the city of Corinth can surmise three reasons.

First, Corinth was on the strategic lines of communications. This is THE major east-west maritime trade route that went via the Isthmus of Corinth, which was a vital link in trade between Rome and the eastern part of the empire. There were also the north-south land roads that went from the Greek mainland to the Peloponnesos. **People from many places and backgrounds passed through this area making Corinth a strategic position for spreading the gospel.**

The second reason for Paul going to Corinth was that there was a **Jewish community in Corinth** Acts 18:4. As a general rule, Paul sought out the Jewish community because he had a desire to reach his circumcised kinsmen (according to the flesh) with the gospel Rom. 1:16; 9:1-5.

The third reason was that the Isthmian Games were held during the spring of AD 51 and **Paul knew there would be many people from throughout Greece at this event.** The games were a **golden opportunity to reach many with the gospel.**

The one common denominator: The Apostle Paul wanted to reach as many people as he could with the gospel. The message that Paul preached to these people was that the Lord Jesus died for all the sins of fallen humanity and rose again from the dead on the third day to prove that sin had been paid for. Paul taught that the Lord offers eternal life, a home in heaven and forgiveness of sins **to any and all** who would put trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for their salvation. Good works or any other meritorious deeds had nothing to do with one's salvation 1 Cor. 15:3-4; Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 4:5; 5:8.

The Isthmian Games

Athletes throughout Greece would converge on the Isthmian Games every two years in the spring to honor of the Greek god Poseidon (the Roman counterpart was Neptune). The most prominent building at Isthmia was a temple dedicated to Poseidon. There was also a stadium, theater and hippodrome used for the athletic competitions. A small structure called the Palaimon was situated near the Poseidon temple. **Within this structure, the athlete took an oath to abide by the rules of the Games. If they broke the oath, they were disqualified from the Games.**

The athletes would compete in footraces, wrestling, boxing, throwing the discus and javelin, the long jump, chariot racing, poetry reading and singing. (Who knew singing was considered an athletic event?). **According to several inscriptions that are contemporary to Paul, women competed in these games as well.** The inscriptions mention women winning the 200-meter dash as well as the war-chariot races.

Without permanent accommodations on site, the people stayed in tents in the surrounding fields. **Fixing or selling tents would have given Paul and his new found colleagues, Aquila and Priscilla, ample employment while on the mission to share the gospel with those attending Acts 18:3.** Joining him were two of his disciples, Silvanus and Timothy 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1.

Paul's Use of Athletic Terminology

Here are four passages of Scripture where Paul has the Isthmian Games in mind.

The first passage is **1 Cor. 9:24-27**. This section introduces the next portion concerning Old Testament examples of believers who were tempted with various sins 10:1-13. Paul encourages them to exercise self-discipline in their Christian life so they will not be *disqualified from the race*.

In the ancient games, only the winner received the crown. There was no 2nd or 3rd place award - winning was everything! Paul encouraged the believers in Corinth to run the race of the Christian life to obtain the prize vs 24. According to Paul, believers are to "compete" by being temperate or exercising self-control, in their personal behavior vs 25.

In the Isthmian Games, winners were awarded...**a celery crown for the prize.** Paul describes it as a "perishable crown", yet focuses the believers attention on the goal of the "heavenly race", an "imperishable crown" vs 25.

The two word pictures that Paul uses in verse 26 are that of a runner who runs focused on the finish line and the boxer who doesn't shy away from his opponent like a shadow boxer, but engages him to the end.

In the Olympics, boxing was the most brutal of events. The boxer wrapped his knuckles with leather straps. In Roman competition, which the Isthmian games followed, wrapping "incorporated lead, irons and even spikes"! The athletes boxed, sometimes up to four hours, until one was knocked out. Or one boxer "signaled defeat by a raised index finger" (Milavic 1992: 14). Boxing was serious and brutal competition. At times, the Christian life could be also 2 Tim. 3:12.

Paul tells them that he disciplines his body so he will not be *disqualified from the Christian "race"* vs 27. Paul is not saying he could lose his salvation. He knew that was eternally secure in the Lord Jesus Christ 2 Tim. 1:12; Rom. 8:31-39. He was, however, concerned that the Lord would not be able to use him in preaching the gospel to others and that he would suffer the loss of rewards as well as be "ashamed at His coming" at the Judgment Seat of Christ 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 3:12-17; 1 John 2:28; 2 Tim. 2:11-13.

The second athletic passage to examine is 1 Tim. 4:7-8. Paul admonishes Timothy to "*exercise yourself to godliness*". He had in mind the gymnasium, which is common in every Greek City, where the athlete would spend time exercising his body in preparation for the upcoming games. Christians should prioritize exercising the "spiritual life" before the "physical life." Paul is not against exercising one's body because he points out there are some temporal benefits for it. However, exercising the spiritual life should be a priority because it has both temporal and eternal consequences.

The third passage is 2 Tim. 2:5. Paul states, "*If anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.*" Paul had in mind the oaths that the athletes took in the underground cave of the Palaimon. Here, athletes swore that they would follow the rules in their training as well as not cheat in order to win the Isthmian crown. In the Christian "race", we must follow the rules as well. In order to know what the rules are, one must know the "Rule Book", the Word of God. It behooves the believer in the Lord Jesus to read, study and apply the

Word of God to his/her life.

The final passage, 2 Tim. 4:6-8, was while Paul was imprisoned in Rome awaiting execution in June AD 67. One of the archaeologists at Isthmia described Paul's words here in this way. "The words in Greek have a more distinctly athletic flavor. To bring this out the passage might be rendered: '*I have competed in the good athletic games; I have finished the foot race, I have kept the pledge (i.e. to compete honestly, with reference to the athletic oath). What remains to me is to receive the crown of righteousness, which has been put aside for me; it will be awarded to me by the Lord, the just umpire, on that day*' (an allusion to the last day of the games when, presumably, the prizes were handed out to the winners)" Broneer 1962:31, footnote 23.

It is interesting that Paul brings up the same two word pictures that he uses in 1 Cor. 9, the boxer and runner, when he describes his disciplined Christian life. Now at the end of his life, the discipline had paid off. He was a winner and without fear of being disqualified.

Paul addressed this passage to his disciple Timothy who had spent time with him in Corinth during his second missionary journey. He instructed Timothy to go to (Alexandria) Troas and bring his winter garments and books that he left with Carpus 2 Tim. 4:13, 21. Paul apparently had left them in Troas during his fourth missionary journey on his way to Nicopolis where he was eventually arrested and taken to Rome Tit. 3:12.

Side note; On his journey from Troas to Nicopolis, Paul stopped in Corinth to meet the believers. While there, Emperor Nero was performing in the singing competition. Nero was visiting Corinth in order to inaugurate the beginning of the Isthmian canal project. While there, he wanted to compete in the Isthmian Games, so the people accommodated him by changing the date of the event to the fall of AD 66.

Roman historian Suetonius, wrote about Nero's singing exploits in Greece in his *Lives of the Caesars, Nero*. He described Nero's voice as "weak and husky" Nero 20:1 and even commented that one of Nero's generals, probably tongue-in-cheek, called it a "divine voice" Nero 21:1. The singing competition did not involve just one song, but a whole oratorio usually lasting several hours.

Suetonius describes some humorous events that transpired while Nero sang. "While he was singing no one was allowed to leave the theatre even for the most urgent reasons. And so it is said that some women gave birth to children there, while many who were worn out listening and applauding, secretly leaped from the walls, since the gates at the entrance were closed or feigned death and were carried out as if for burial" Nero 23:2. This is hardly a description of a prize-winning voice. Yet Nero won almost all the contests he entered. How did he do it?

There were four ways Nero could win the singing competition. First, he could win on his own merits because he had an excellent voice. Suetonius squelched that. Second, he could bribe his competition to "throw" the contest. Some of them did take the money Nero offered them Nero 23:2. One greedy competitor thought he could take advantage of this and ask for 10 talents (of gold?). Nero thought this was extortion so he reverted to his... third option, which was to send his thugs out to intimidate this competitor. The final way for him to win was to bribe the judges. That Nero did very effectively by offering the judges Roman citizenship and a large sum of money Nero 23:3; 24:2

Paul's final words to Timothy:

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who love His appearing." The Apostle Paul knew he had played by the rules and that he had won. The Lord Jesus, the righteous Judge, would reward him. In contrast to Nero who did not play by the rules and had bribed unrighteous judges!

Paul wrote Timothy saying his crown came from the Lord Jesus, not Eutychia 2 Tim. 4:8 and it was to give Him all the glory for the strength to stand firm in the conflict 2 Tim. 4:18.

Paul's Outreach Strategy

He went where the people were. There are some Christians who have expressed concerns about Christians going to athletic events, especially the Olympics, because of the commercialism and the pagan New Age influence. Yet this is not new to Paul who was already dealing with Poseidon and commercialism at the Isthmian Games. **Paul did not go to the Isthmian Games to worship Poseidon; he went to witness to people! Christians should take advantages of local and state fairs, athletic events, and religious festivals to present the gospel to a multitude of people.**

Second, when Paul communicated with the people using familiar illustrations. His epistles are peppered with athletic terminology (Sauer 1956: 30-67). The teacher of the Word of God should know his audience and use word-pictures from everyday life that are familiar to them. In the event that believers are going to large events to pass out tracts, the gospel literature should be pertinent to the event and clearly presents the gospel.

Third, Paul was not a “Lone Ranger” missionary when he engaged in mission work. He always did his outreach with others. He was able to work side by side with transplanted “locals”, Aquila and Priscilla as well as continue his discipleship of Silvanus and Timothy 2 Tim. 2:1-2.

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