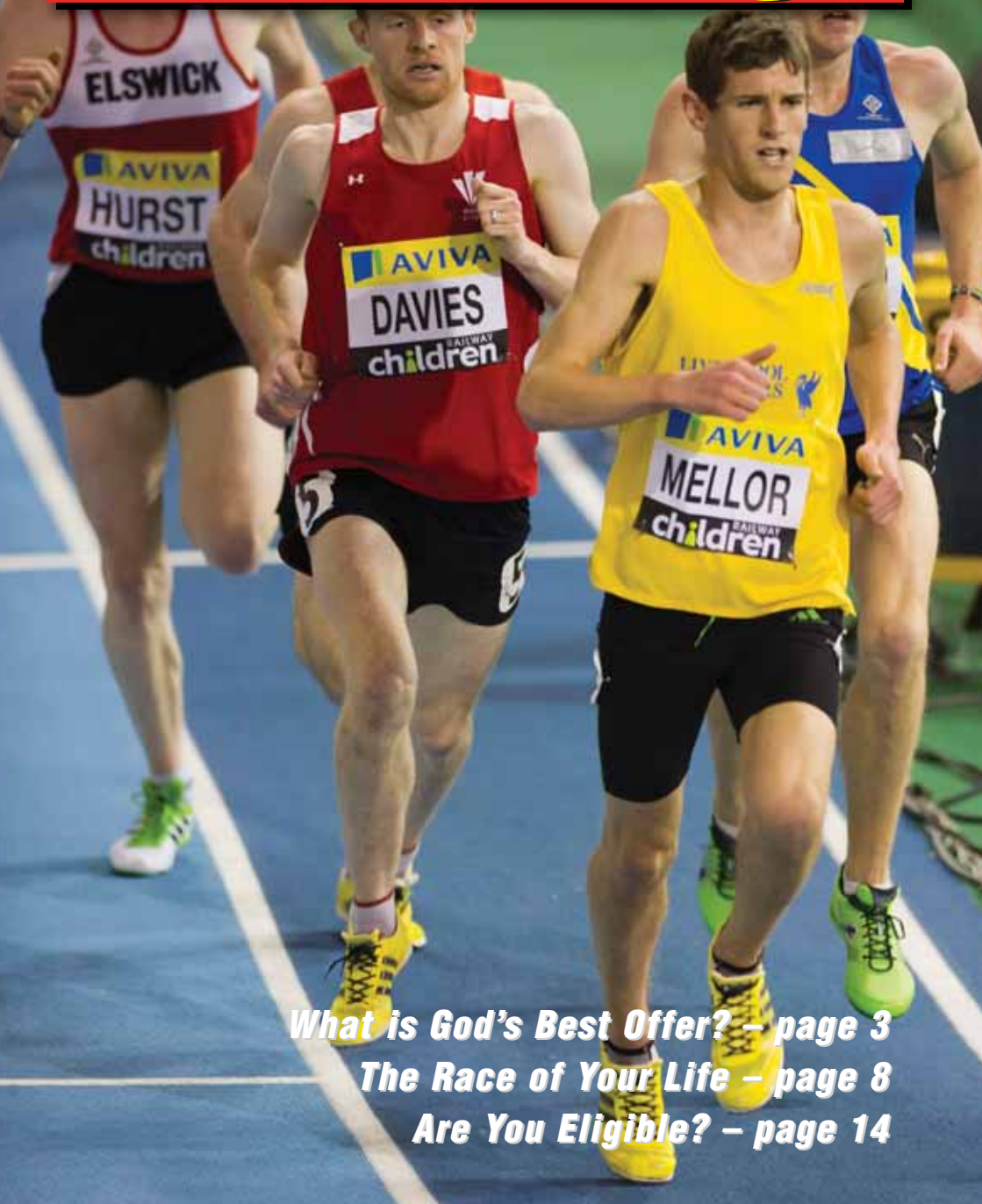


Glad Tidings

OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1537



What is God's Best Offer? – page 3

The Race of Your Life – page 8

Are You Eligible? – page 14

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OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

128th Year

F12

1537



A monthly magazine published by the Christadelphians (brothers and sisters in Christ) and available throughout the world.

Its objectives are – to encourage the study of the Bible as God's inspired message to mankind; to call attention to the Divine offer of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ; and to warn men and women that soon Christ will return to Earth as judge and ruler of God's world-wide Kingdom.

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As the Olympics Games are being held in London in July and August, this issue looks at some of the spiritual lessons that can be gained from contemplating the Race of Life.

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What is God's Best Offer?

When buying something important or expensive, you're likely to want the best terms available. In some countries bargaining is the usual arrangement, where you always try to beat the price down. Nobody is offended by the process: it's what usually happens.

Bargaining with God?

There are some things you can't get at a reduced price of course. At an auction, for example, you have to keep bidding if you want to succeed and the price never comes down during that process. The more people there are bidding, the higher the price, especially when the item is very desirable and very scarce.

So what about trying for the most precious thing ever, the thing that everybody would like to have – eternal life in a perfect world? Do you think you can do a deal with God to secure that commodity? Or do you think you can earn it by the way you live, so that a righteous and reasonable Creator would feel that you truly deserve it, and that He couldn't refuse it?

One day God contacted a man who was living a comfortable life in a prosperous city and asked him to leave home and go with Him into the unknown. He did not say where Abraham was to end up, God just said:

"Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1).

If he did so, God said, then He would make him a great nation, bless him,

and through him He would bless all nations of the earth. Those were high stakes and it was a big call, but Abraham was a big man and he and his family went off with God into the unknown. He left the city which he knew and became a farmer, spending the rest of his life as a tent dweller. He never argued back or tried to improve the terms which God had offered. Abraham didn't try to bargain; he just took God at His word and acted accordingly. It proved to be a good strategy, for during the course of Abraham's life God added promise to promise.

One Starry Night

One evening Abraham was called out of his tent and told to look up at the starry night sky. In those days – some 4000 years ago – there was much less ambient light, so the stars would have stood out crystal clear. God said to him:

"Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be" (Genesis 15.5).

It was an amazing thing for God to tell this tent dweller, for an awful lot of stars are visible on a clear night. But Abraham's response was equally wonderful. The historical account simply says:

He believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

God made his servant a great promise – the sort of promise everyone

of us would like to receive for our families – and this faithful man believed it. Abraham was that sort of a man. And that act of faith is expounded thousands of years later, in the New Testament, not just for Abraham’s sake, but for our benefit too. Here’s the comment, by the apostle Paul:

Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham (Galatians 3:6–9).

Counted Righteous

Here in Galatians the apostle explains how we can be counted or reckoned righteous with God. That very prospect seems unlikely, given our natural condition. Human nature is not naturally inclined towards worship, which is why there are so many people who don’t even believe in the existence of God. We are all inclined to please ourselves, first and foremost, which just goes to show what an exceptional man Abraham was. He believed God and that was good enough for God. As it turned out that was a characteristic of Abraham’s life. He always acted accordingly, for whatever God asked of him this faithful man was willing to do it.

Paul’s point in Galatians is that if we believe what God has told us – in the Bible – we too can be counted “right” or “righteous” in His sight, just as Abraham was. In fact, he goes on to say that we can be counted as members of Abraham’s extended

family when we join ourselves to that faithful company by being baptised into the saving name of Jesus after believing what God has promised. Here’s his explanation:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26–29).

God’s Offer

God wants to give His people everlasting life in a perfect world, for He will transform the world and fill it with His glory when the Lord Jesus Christ returns from heaven to establish God’s Kingdom here. The rulership of Jesus will ensure that all the problems we now experience – ill health, famine, war, injustice, oppression, and all our other woes – will be resolved. God has a plan, and He has a man who will administer the world and rule it righteously.

We can never be good enough of ourselves to earn a place in God’s Kingdom. Fortunately we don’t have to achieve the impossible. Jesus has earned a place for us by his faithful and obedient life and he gave his life as a sacrifice for sin to make our forgiveness a reality. The gift that God offers is eternal life. We don’t need to bargain with God; that would be pointless. But we do need to accept God’s offer and live accordingly. If we want to share Abraham’s inheritance, we need to develop Abraham’s faith.

Editor

Teamwork

Have you ever watched cyclists racing against each other around a track?

The new Olympic Velodrome in London has already been used competitively, when a World Cup competition was staged there, and most of the world's top track cyclists took the opportunity to get the feel of the track. Perhaps most thrilling are the events where two competing teams start the race spaced exactly opposite each other with half of the circuit between them.

At the starting gun, off they go, with the intention of making up ground on their rivals at the end of the contest, which is raced over a predetermined number of laps. In a crowded stadium with a partisan crowd encouraging their favourites to victory, the excitement is palpable!

Working Together

Each team goes out in the order which makes best use of the strengths of their individual members and spectators can see the precise difference in each team's time as they cross the finishing line at the end of each circuit. Whilst racing, the cyclists take it in turn to ride at the front because, due to the slipstream effect, there is less energy used in following. They are riding at speeds of 60 to 80 kph, with only about 20-30 centimetres between the rear and the next front wheel. So if they are not paying close attention to their teammates ahead, it will be only too easy to crash, ending the contest for the whole team. The finishing time may be that of each team's third rider



over the line – but the fourth rider is not forgotten when it comes to the prizes, because he or she has contributed to that time by the effort contributed in the earlier stages.

It used to be the case that the most important thing in sport was not the winning but the taking part. Sadly, that ideal has long since been surpassed by the realisation that success can result in huge material rewards. But when you see the camaraderie shared between cycling team members, you can understand the genuine happiness which they feel for each other's successes, and the support they give each other when things have not gone so well.

Interdependence

Teamwork is equally evident when you watch a relay race, when success depends so much on the passing of the baton at the end of a runner's stint. A lack of co-ordination at that point can mean failure for the whole team effort. There is also the so-called "anchor leg", where perhaps the strongest runner – who may be regarded as the leader of the team – has the job of making up any ground lost to the other teams and thereby making a win



possible. Trainers can be seen standing on the sidelines, encouraging their charges and passing signals to let them know how they are doing.

They may not be racing, but trainers are an essential part of the team. They have to understand what it is like for the athlete, and many will have participated in the same sport when younger. They must also understand what counselling and encouragement is required to keep their charges focused, and their morale high. So we see that, while there are different duties and responsibilities, each member is a vital part of the team, runner and helper alike. All have to work together if they are to succeed.

Contributing

Watching sport can be very satisfying and sometimes watchers can make a real contribution. Home crowds are described by athletes as an extra member of the team, because of the boost which comes from their support. But is there anybody watching you and helping you as you compete in the game of life? There most certainly is! The Lord Jesus Christ promised his followers that he would always be there to help and to will them on, as they make their individual efforts to follow him.

Like the team trainer mentioned earlier, Jesus has been here before and he was completely successful when confronted with the enormous challenges he faced. His life is the perfect example of how to be conditioned for every circumstance so as to overcome the distractions and obstacles which often impede us.

But there's a bit more to it than that. Inevitably, athletes fall victim to injuries and, if possible, have to be brought back to fitness again, although that's not always possible. Jesus, to whom we look as a guide in the competition of life, has, by obedience to the requirements of his Heavenly Father, secured a prize which transcends the normal result of the frailties of our human condition.

The Bible teaches us that, because he never sinned, Jesus could not have been left dead forever. For God is both righteous and loving and so He raised His Son from the dead to newness of life. Jesus now sits on the right hand of God, waiting for the time when God will send him back to earth to establish His Kingdom here.

Meanwhile Jesus is watching us, keeping an eye on our progress, hoping that we can share in the successful completion of his efforts. As our Guide and Trainer, Jesus has put the work in to get the best out of us. He has explained in the Bible just what we need to do. His ideal is that we all work together for good – for God – using our different strengths and skills to bring glory to our Heavenly Father. By God's grace, we may receive the prize of eternal life at the return of Jesus.

The Way Ahead

Everyone is different and all of us have something special to contribute. But

there is a fundamental choice to be made. Are we going to live just for ourselves, or do we want to share the strength which like-minded individuals can offer, finding the benefits which fellowship can bring? The world would be much less interesting if everybody was the same. God knows this, and the Bible shows that He expects different types of people to work together, so as to obtain the best results for all. Here's how the apostle Paul expresses that thought:

“There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit ... But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all ... But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ ... But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body ... that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually (1 Corinthians 12:4-27).

Only Believe!

We are not all the same, but we can all be one – together – in Christ. This is how the same apostle summarised that thought when writing to the Galatians:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26–28).

That oneness or unity is not without purpose, as Paul explains elsewhere. When we belong to Jesus – by believing in his saving work and being baptised, so as to associate ourselves with his life's work – we become members of God's family and belong to the great work of salvation that has been ongoing ever since the creation of the world.

Family Members

*Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and **members of the household of God**, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19–22).*

When we repent of our sins and are baptised, we become part of the Jesus team. Our handbook is the Word of God, which reveals to us the blessings which will be given to faithful participants. Our example and team coach is the Lord Jesus. Our companions are all those who are running with us in the race of life, helping one another as we journey so that we can all receive God's gracious gift of everlasting life.

Bob Watt

The Race of Your Life

The life of an athlete is a combination of commitment, routine and diet – sacrifices must be made. A great athlete needs to focus upon a goal – the finish line, the victory, the prize! In the mind of any athlete the prize justifies the sacrifices.

So too the follower of Christ. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul (a believer and follower of Jesus Christ) draws parallels between the life of an athlete and the life of a Christian. He says,

‘Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.’

1 Corinthians 9: 24-25

In the lifetime of Paul the victorious athlete would be presented with a crown, not of gold or of silver but a wreath of bay or olive leaves. It was the ultimate prize – there was nothing for second or third place!



While the wreath would have looked fantastic on the day of the race, in time it would wither and perish. By contrast Paul says,

‘They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.’

1 Corinthians 9: 25

This is the goal - the truly ultimate prize – the Kingdom of God!

Literally, the Greek word ‘athlete’ means ‘one who competes for a prize’. But it is the mind which must be exercised for God’s race – conditioned by God’s Word and focussed toward this great prize.

‘Blessed is the man who remains steadfast [perseveres, endures] under trial; for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him.’

James 1: 12





A contemporary of Paul, the Apostle Peter, put it like this:

'...effort... self control... steadfastness... if you practice these qualities you will never fall; (and) ...for you an entrance into the eternal Kingdom...'

2 Peter 1: 10-11

Athletes must be free of unnecessary weight. Their physical condition, even their clothing, is designed to ensure they are as effective and competitive as possible. Jesus' achievement was to remove any thought for himself and instead live out the will of his Father. The book of Hebrews encourages us to do as Jesus did,

'let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely...'

Hebrews 12: 1

Before Jesus received the crown of life he endured the crown of thorns.

'and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head... And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!'

Matthew 27: 29

Jesus led by example and gives us Hope. He ran perfectly and, without wrongdoing, endured to the end.

'...let us run with endurance the race... looking to Jesus... who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand... of God.'

Hebrews 12: 1-2

The Bible promises that Jesus will return to establish God's Kingdom – a restored Earth – for those who have submitted themselves to God. He is calling us all to be athletes in a race that leads to that Kingdom...

...are you prepared for the race of your life?





Endurance

Completing an endurance race requires commitment, patience and perseverance. It is no easy feat, taking huge effort and often some pain. Similarly, we should not expect the race that God has set for us to be a simple undertaking.

Jesus told the parable of a sower, who scattered seed over varying ground. Crops sprang up on a patch of rocky ground but quickly withered. Jesus said,

...when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.

Luke 8:13

If we enter the race without the necessary commitment, we will find ourselves pulling out of it when challenged. Some seed was scattered on thorny ground, and of this Jesus said,

...they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.

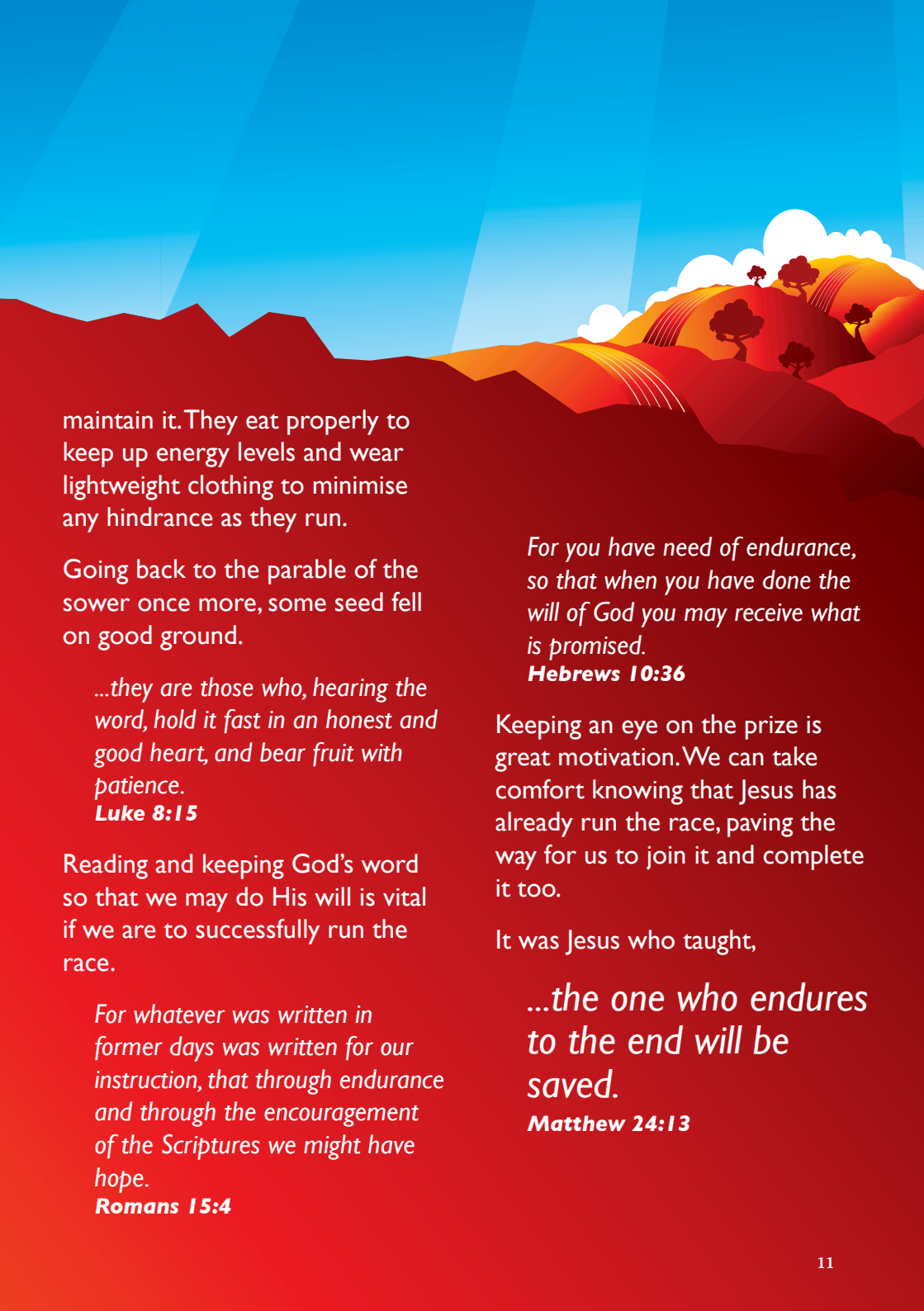
Luke 8:14

At times the Psalmist David struggled with this. He saw the success of those who had no regard for God, perhaps with some envy. But he realised that success in this life is of no lasting value.

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!

Psalms 37:7

So how can we ensure that we are able to endure the race, staying the course through challenging stretches as well as the easier sections? Having trained to a good level of fitness, athletes work to



maintain it. They eat properly to keep up energy levels and wear lightweight clothing to minimise any hindrance as they run.

Going back to the parable of the sower once more, some seed fell on good ground.

...they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

Luke 8:15

Reading and keeping God's word so that we may do His will is vital if we are to successfully run the race.

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Romans 15:4

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

Hebrews 10:36

Keeping an eye on the prize is great motivation. We can take comfort knowing that Jesus has already run the race, paving the way for us to join it and complete it too.

It was Jesus who taught,

...the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Matthew 24:13

The Finish Line

Running in the race towards God's Kingdom isn't about competing against other disciples; in this race we are running against our own selfish nature. The person crossing the finish line needs to be the very best person we can be.

Jesus put aside all thought for himself and instead did exactly what pleased his Father.

This didn't come easy, even for Jesus. He feared the 'cup' (death on the cross), and he prayed,

"Father, if you are willing remove this cup from me."

But, in the same breath, he added,

"Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."
Luke 22: 42

This attitude of mind was essential to Jesus' victory over sin and death and the same challenge is presented to his followers. Paul said,

I do not run aimlessly... but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest ...I myself should be disqualified.
I Corinthians 9: 26-27

All sporting competitions have regulations, conditions of entry and the occasional disqualification. Likewise, the runner in God's race is met with conditions. Baptism is an example, demonstrated here in the record of the Apostle Philip who meets an Ethiopian Official,

...seated in his chariot reading the prophet Isaiah.
Acts 8: 27

Philip approaches the Ethiopian and asks him if he understands what he is reading. The reply,

"How can I unless someone guides me?" ...Then Phillip... told him the good news about Jesus.
Acts 8: 27-35

The Ethiopian,

- had learned,
- Philip helped him understand,
- he then took action.

On arriving at an area of water the Ethiopian asks for baptism, an outward token of his commitment to God.

As the Greek word suggests, baptism was complete immersion in water. The Official would have had water for his journey sufficient for a sprinkling and yet he doesn't suggest baptism until they arrive at 'some water'. (**v37**)

After Philip baptises the Ethiopian we are told,

They came up out of the water.
v39

From this record, and others, it becomes clear that baptism is a decision to be arrived at by consenting adults making informed choices.



Jesus himself sets the example. His cousin John the Baptist thought Jesus was too good to be baptised by him, but,

...Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." Then (John) consented.

Matthew 3: 13-15

Serving God means putting aside our own interests or the things that are right or important in *our minds*. Instead we need to consider what pleases God.

...when Jesus was baptised, immediately he went up from the water... and behold a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 3: 16-17

- Jesus learned, understood and put it into action.
- Take his example as your guide and *really* listen to God.
- With the Kingdom of God as our goal let's run with endurance the race of our lives..!

*...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead... **press on toward the goal for the prize... in Christ Jesus.***

Philippians 3: 12-14

Jonathan Gill

Quotations from the ESV

Are You Eligible?

Would you be eligible to enter a major sporting event like the Olympic Games? In ancient times, you could only enter if you were a male Greek citizen. So eligibility would then have been beyond your control.

Qualifications

To enter the modern Olympics you must live in a country that has a National Olympic Committee which is recognised by the International Olympic Committee.

- ❖ If you wanted to enter and you happened to live in the wrong place, you would need to think about making a major change in your life.
- ❖ If your country had the required committee, obviously that on its own would not be enough. You would then need to have outstanding talent for a sport that is included in the Games. You would have to be a leading participant in national sport before you could compete internationally.

Perhaps you feel that none of this is relevant to you. After all, competing in the Olympic Games is for the elite, isn't it? But is the most important prize of all also limited by similar rules and requirements? Is it only certain people who are eligible for the gift of eternal life, to be granted by God?

Entry Restrictions

Jesus told his disciples that entry into the Kingdom of God is not for everyone and then spelled out what is required



of his followers in every age. Here are some of those requirements.

"I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

The scribes and Pharisees were the elite of Jewish society. They commanded respect because of their thorough grasp of the Old Testament, the law of their land. They loved long and complicated debates on tiny details of that law and saw Jesus as a troublemaker from Galilee. He did not belong to their group; although he was able to speak with breathtaking authority about the Scriptures they knew so well. So Jesus was referring to a way in which we can be right with God which was quite unlike the way adopted by the Pharisees.

In Matthew 5 and 6, Jesus warns his followers that it is not enough to look outwardly respectable for God can see what is on the inside. Asked by his disciples about who will be the greatest in God's coming Kingdom, Jesus told them:



“...unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3-4).

A little child does not think he knows everything and that he is better than other people. So Jesus was asking his followers to adopt a humble and teachable attitude if they are to please God. Jesus once amazed them by saying:

“...How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23).

To the disciples, who were poor men, it appeared to be a very strange thing to say. They had observed how money and social standing allowed people to have certain privileges. Later in the same chapter, Jesus explained that:

“... many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Mark 10:31).

Our status in this life will be worth nothing to us when we die, but there is a treasure that will stand us in good stead both for this life and the life that is to come, in the Kingdom of God. So what is this “Kingdom of heaven”, or “Kingdom of God” about which Jesus taught? And why would we want to enter it?

In Mark 10:29-30, Jesus promised that those who have been willing to give up the good things of this life for his sake will be rewarded. The ultimate reward is “eternal life”. No amount of money can buy us that, although many people are willing to pay a lot to try and prolong their youth.

Seeking the Kingdom

Jesus once told a story about a rich man who wanted to build bigger barns to store a good harvest. The man said to himself:

“Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 12:9).

God called the man a fool, because that night he was going to die, and he would not be able to take any of his many possessions with him. This was one of many stories that Jesus told about the Kingdom of God. For he wanted his disciples to prepare for the time when he will reign as King of the whole earth. He then explained the need to trust in God, instead of continually thinking about what we will eat and wear:

*“For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But **seek the kingdom of God**, and all these things shall be added to you” (Luke 12:30-31).*

If we are totally caught up with the details of this life we will not be able to look ahead to something so much better that God has promised for this earth. Even if our lives are easy and pleasant, we know that they will come to an end one day. We do not live forever. But in the Kingdom of God, people *will* live forever, and things will be so very different to the way they are today.

Kingdom Qualifications

The educated people of Israel thought they were the only people who were worthy to enter God's kingdom. This made Jesus both angry and sad and he told them so.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in"(Matthew 23:13).

"Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered" (Luke 11:52).

Jesus wanted people to prepare for God's Kingdom, and he reassured his followers that God wants them to be there (Luke 12:32). So the key qualification is that we must desire it. We must want to be in God's Kingdom more than we want any other thing. As Jesus said, we are to:

"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

If we really really want to be in the Kingdom of God there is a way in which we can make our lives right with God – which is what *"righteousness"* really means. By believing God's promises and by being baptised into the saving name of Jesus we can be saved from sin and death.

Treasure in Heaven

The disciples were instructed to focus on godly things or, as Jesus said, to cultivate *"treasure in the heavens"* (Luke 12:33). By focusing our lives upon the things that God has revealed



in His Word we can be assured that God will reward His people abundantly when Jesus returns. And if the finishing line is our aim – as it should be for any competitive athlete – then we will live accordingly. What Jesus said was: *"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"* (Luke 12:34).

We have the opportunity now to prepare ourselves for the coming Kingdom of God. When Jesus returns he will reward those who believed what he said and did what he asked of them. The good news is that God wants us to be in His kingdom. The entry requirement is simple: a willingness to learn and a readiness to make changes in our lives – putting ourselves into God's hands.

In another of his stories about the Kingdom, Jesus described an employer who had trusted his servants to work, while he went away. On his return the employer said to one:

"Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord" (Matthew 25:21).

There can be no better outcome for a person's life than to be commended in those terms by the Lord Jesus when he returns. That is something well worth working for!

Rachel Yuile

The Rules of the Race

Athletes in any sport have to compete according to a set of rules. These are laid down in a rule book and everyone who competes needs to be aware of them.

Officials, administrators and referees are appointed to ensure that the rules are upheld. All sports have a body that has overall responsibility for the running of that sport.

Total Coverage

These rules exist to make sure that all who compete know what is expected of them: what they can do and what they are not allowed to do. This ensures no misunderstanding and that all compete fairly, having the same opportunity. There is a phrase that is much used today when people talk about ‘a level playing field’. That provides a good summary of what the rules are intended to do, for it would be quite unfair in a competitive field game if one side was playing uphill and the other side had the advantage of playing downhill.

Every aspect of the race, game, jump or throw is covered in the rules, not only when the sport is taking place, but also,

- ❖ how it should start,
- ❖ what should be worn, and
- ❖ how it should finish

The list of rules and regulations can go on and on. If a competitor breaks those rules and tries to gain an unfair advantage, officials are there to decide what penalty should be applied. This generally depends on how seriously

the rules have been abused. Once the athlete starts to compete, the rules become second nature to them. It's not a matter of rigidly following them, but of developing a life of dedicated service to achieve the goal. For example, if there are prohibited substances, including some medication, then the athlete will choose food and medicine accordingly. These become life-long habits.

The Spiritual Athlete

As with the natural so with the spiritual athlete – up to a point anyway! The rules of a spiritual athlete are God's rules contained in the Bible, the Word of God. We, as spiritual athletes, must develop the pattern of behaviour prescribed in the Bible if we are to be rewarded. The apostle Paul wrote these words of advice about God's rule book, when writing to a young disciple:

From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:15–17).

All that we need to be complete and thoroughly equipped is provided for us by God in His Word. The goal that God offers is everlasting life in God's future kingdom which is to be established on earth. This is explained in more detail elsewhere in this magazine but this is how the Bible – the “Holy Scriptures”, as Paul calls them – can make us wise unto this salvation offered by God. It

explains what God is doing to bring about a new society on earth and tells us what sort of spiritual attitude we need to cultivate. Here is the apostle's comment on his own mental state:

I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14).

The Starting Line

In both quotations referred to above the apostle Paul refers to the importance of Jesus Christ.

- ❖ In 2 Timothy 3, verse 15, the salvation offered to us is *through faith in Jesus Christ*.
- ❖ In Philippians 3, verse 14, the call of God is *in Christ Jesus*.

Here we find the 'starting line rule'. Our race must commence with a faith in Jesus Christ. We can only be saved by believing in Jesus and accepting his teachings.



The Bible tells us that we acknowledge our faith in Jesus Christ by being baptised. Every reference in the Bible to baptism is where someone is at an age to understand what they are doing by being baptised. It is a deliberate act and signifies that we knowingly start the race of our lives, trying to follow the example of Jesus in all that we do. The apostle Peter, at the end of the third chapter of his first letter,

describes baptism as the answer of a good conscience toward God. It is the right way to start our race and Jesus showed us it is the right thing to do when he was himself baptised.

References to athletes and athletic endeavour are not merely topical, because of the Olympic Games. This is a Bible theme, which itself reminds us that competitive games have been around for a long time, in one form or another. Here's the apostle Paul again:

*No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. And also **if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules** (2 Timothy 2:4–5).*

God's Rules

What is really interesting is that some of the rules of the race in Christ are different from those that apply to an athlete competing in worldly races. We must run according to God's rules in the Bible, or risk disqualification.

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1–2).

Once again we see Jesus as our example in the way we run our race. Notice also that we are to lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us. In Galatians chapter 5, Paul gives us a list of what we should

avoid, classing these things as “*the works of the flesh*”, and then he provides a list of better qualities that we should aim to practice. These positive rules are described as “*the fruit of the spirit*”.

Now **the works of the flesh** are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But **the fruit of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law (Galatians 5:19–23).

Running Together

This “*fruit of the Spirit*” introduces a totally different concept. It’s not all about competition and beating the other athlete. God’s rules mean that we should be seeking God’s righteousness, doing what is right and pleasing in His sight. Rather than beat the other athlete, we are to help each other on the road towards the glorious goal of a place in God’s coming Kingdom. Ours should be a life of genuine dedication to God, seeking first His kingdom.



During the ministry of Jesus, a lawyer approached Jesus and asked him, which is the greatest commandment in the law? The response by Jesus gives us a succinct summary of the rules that apply to the spiritual athlete.

Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37–40).

So if we are to compete in the race of life according to God’s rules we must start by reading God’s Word, the Bible. If we accept its teaching and we want to follow Jesus Christ in our lives, the start of our race is baptism. That is how we start a new life in a relationship with Almighty God, made possible by the saving work of the Lord Jesus. It is a wonderful comfort for us to know that God, who sets the rules, wants us all to succeed. As Jesus said:

“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

God has a purpose with the earth He created which involves all those who really want to be part of the future He has planned. For, when Jesus returns to rule as King, he will raise his faithful followers who are now asleep in death and he will give to all those who are judged faithful the wonderful gift of everlasting life in a perfect world.

In that way God will be glorified and His way will be shown to be the right way for all mankind. A loving God asks for our loving response, so that we can spend eternity together.

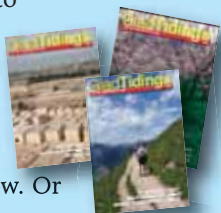
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