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"Running the Race"

by Mark Legendre

Have you ever noticed the number of passages in the Bible that draw spiritual lessons from sporting events? For instance, in 1st Corinthians 9:24, Paul says **"Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain."** This sets the context of verses 25-27 that follow where Paul teaches several important lessons. First, he says that you can't win the race if you don't enter it. Second, you should enter the contest with the purpose of being the victor. And third, you must be willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary in order to achieve your goal. Paul also states his amazement at the fact that men go to great extremes in the training and sacrifices that they make in order to **"obtain a corruptible crown."**

The spiritual lessons that Paul teaches from this text are very important. His first lesson is this: You can't make it to Heaven without becoming a Christian. And then, after you have become a Christian, you must continually practice discipline and self-control in order to achieve your goal of **"obtaining the incorruptible crown"** (1 Pet. 1:3-4). And thirdly, if you stop living as a Christian ought to live (quit the race before crossing the finish line), then you will lose your salvation.

Another text of scripture that deals with **"running the race"** is found in Acts 20:22-24. Paul speaks of going to Jerusalem and how he would be persecuted in that city. He then goes on to say in verse 24, **"But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy."** Having entered the Christian race, Paul's attitude is that he would not allow anything to keep him from **"finishing the course,"** be it persecution or even death. As he comes to the end of his life, we read his statement in 2 Timothy 4:6-8, **"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."** Having successfully completed his race, Paul speaks with confidence of the **"crown of righteousness"** that he would receive in Heaven.

In Hebrews 12:1-3, we read about **"running with patience the race that is set before us."** He refers to the men and women of faith that we read about in Chapter 11 of Hebrews by referring to them as a **"great cloud of witnesses."** These persons have completed their race and now surround us to give us encouragement to run the race to its end. We then see Jesus pictured as though He was standing at the finish line waiting for us to reach Him by crossing the finish line ourselves. The Hebrew writer tells us that we must have **"patience"** in running the race that is set before us and that when we feel ourselves getting weary along the track, that we should remind ourselves of all that Jesus went through in order to make it possible for us to go to Heaven. And then with determination, finish the race to its climax.

"...What Saith the Scripture..."

By Mark Legendre

Q. What does the Bible say about "fasting" and are Christians obligated to "fast" today?

A. The subject of "fasting" is spoken of frequently in the scriptures and has to do with the "abstinence from food and or drink for a certain amount of time." Sometimes, instead of the single work "fast" being used, the phrase "to afflict the soul" is spoken of as a reference to physical fasting. This term is used in a variety of places in the Old Testament, but is the only one used to denote the religious observance of fasting in the Pentateuch (Lev. 16:29-31; Num. 30:13).

The only fast that was required by the Law of Moses was that which took place on the Day of Atonement. Before the time of the Babylonian Captivity, it was the one regular fast observed by the Jews (Lev. 23:27-32). During this period of Israel's history, there were numerous fasts that took place because of the sins of the people (1 Sam. 7:6). We also read of individuals fasting as well such as David when his child was dying (2 Sam. 12:16, 21-23).

After the Babylonian Captivity four annual feasts were practiced by the Jews in memory of various national calamities that the nation had experienced. These are mentioned in Zechariah 7:1-8 and 8:19. By the time Christ had arrive don the scene, these fasts had fallen into disuse, and were not revived until after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 a.d. by the Romans.

Fasting by the Israelites was either partial or total, depending upon the length of the fast. The fast on the Day of Atonement lasted "from even till even" (Lev. 23:32). Longer fasts are spoken of in Nehemiah 1:4 and also Daniel 10:2-3. Religious fasting was one as a sign of mourning for sin, with the purpose of removing God's wrath or winning His compassion. Fastings also took place when loved ones died, such as in the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (1 Sam. 31:7-13).

There are only a few references to fasting in the Gospels, but what is said indicates that frequent fasts were habitual among the most religious Jews. We are told that Anna "served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (Lk. 2:37). The Pharisee in the parable told by Jesus said, "I fast twice in the week" (Lk. 18:9-14). There is no reason to doubt that Jesus observed the usual prescribed public fasts, but He did not either by practice or precept stress fasting. In all of His teaching He spoke on the subject of fasting only twice. In Matthew 6:16-18, He condemns fasting for the purpose of making a show of piety. Fasting was to be done toward God, and not to impress men. In Matthew 9:14-17, Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees and the disciples of John about why they fast so often and yet the disciples of Jesus do not. Jesus explained that fasting was a sign of mourning and that while the Messiah was among the people the disciples should be filled with joy instead of sorrow. Therefore, fasting at

this time would have been out of place.

The Acts of the Apostles has only a few references to fasting. For example, the church at Antioch fasted and prayed before sending out Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey (Acts 13:2-3). On Paul's first missionary journey, elders were appointed in every church, with prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23).

There are, therefore, in the New Testament only four indisputable references to voluntary fasting for religious purposes, two by our Lord in the Gospels, and two in the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus did not disapprove of the practice, but says nothing especially to comment it. The early church practiced it, but perhaps only as a carry-over from Judaism, since most of the early Christians were Jews.