

12.30.19 – Apostle Paul and the Greek and Roman Games

In this week's article we are going to look at some of the Apostle Paul's references to the sports events of his time. Entertainment was a large part of the Greek and Roman era. Becoming more important as the end of the Roman empire approached. One of the factors that led to the fall of the empire was spending money and effort on entertainment that should have been used for defense and justice for all. The games originally were to improve military skills, but they ended up helping to destroy what they were originally designed to help. Like fire can keep your house warm in the winter, but if it gets out of control it will destroy the whole house. The rulers used entertainment to quell the people and prevent uprisings. References to sporting events would be understood by everyone. In the Greek Olympic Games, only males were allowed to compete, and they were all naked except for the chariot races. These games were big events in New Testament times as much as the NFL is today. Almost everyone knew about the games and many attended them, making them a familiar illustration for spiritual truths. Since the only event in the earliest Olympics was the foot race, we will start with a verse related to that.

Phl 3:14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. This verse is using the foot race from the games as an illustration of the energy that should be put into reaching the goals God asks of you. The races were always some number of stadion, which is about 600 ft. High school track meets had a 100 yard dash and a 200 yard dash, now meters instead of yards, which would be a half stadion and a full stadion. Greek measuring systems were not very standardized so the 3 inches or so between yards and meters make little difference in the comparison. The word "stadium" is derived from the Greek word for the name and length of the race, stadion. For short races like these the runners would not need to pace themselves as in longer races. All the body's effort was on getting to the mark (finish line). You could catch up on your breathing after the race. Paul is saying he is doing all he

physically can now for the calling of Christ, and that he will rest in heaven.

Heb 12:1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Attendance at the games both in Rome and Olympia were in the 50,000 to 250,000 range. Almost every town with much size had a stadium and held races and other events. The people the Apostle Paul was addressing would be able to visualize a large crowd. The Greek word for "weight" could be translated "encumbrance" accordance to the Blue Letter Bible site. Because the races were run naked that would include clothing. They could have used weights for training and not for the event. It could be that Paul is saying, "Lay aside the training weights, this is the real event." the Apostle Paul may have been thinking of the longest race which ranged from 12 to 24 stadion (1.4 to 2.8 miles). It is important to pace yourself for the longer races. If you run too fast at the beginning, you may not be able to finish or will be so slow finishing that everyone will pass you. If you run too slow at the beginning, you may be too far behind at the end to catch up. Each runner has to learn the pace that is best for him to get the best time. Satan will provide someone who is doing much better than you to get you to burnout early instead of doing the good near the goal. The little I observed about track included timing races as part of training. How do you measure the time for a race with a sundial? I do not think the hourglass was invented till long after Bible times. How did a runner know when he had his pace right? This is the illustration of the need for patience. Don't break your pace because someone is ahead. Don't depend too much on the kick at the end to catch up. We are not all running the same race for God, but we still look for someone who is not doing as well as we think we are to stroke our pride. We can't compare our progress with others if it is not the same race. "The race that is set before us" is not as easy to notice our progress as in a foot race. That is not a reason to become overanxious or depend on tomorrow to catch up. Patience is needed to make the daily choices.

1Co 9:26 I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: Those who excelled at the races or the wrestling and boxing had to spend many hours practicing and working with a trainer. We guess at the practice or training based on images on pottery and arguments in literary works. This verse seems to be using the practice activities to say that the Apostle Paul is not just practicing with his message or lifestyle, but it is real. Boxers had punching bags and used weights held in their hands to strengthen their arms by beating into the air holding the weights. The uncertain running may have been training for boxers to avoid the attacks of the opponent.

1Co 9:27 But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway. This also seems to be referring to training for the games, but it could be what was expected of all Greek and Roman men. The athletes had to train for one month at Olympia and have 10 months of training before coming. Other games must have had similar rules. Training included diet, exercise, and practice to prepare the body for the game. Most of this would not be considered fun or the choice lifestyle if not preparing for the games. All males were expected to keep themselves in good physical shape. If they were need for war, they were ready physically. They could be drafted for immediate duty at any time till they reached the age of 60. It seems reasonable to assume that many more athletes went to the games than were selected to participate. I am thinking "castaway" could be someone who was cut before the game. He did all the work but missed even a chance for glory. It might be a man called for military duty and sent home because he was not fit for the battle. Lots of face to lose on that one also.

1Ti 4:8 For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come. The Greek word translated "exercise" in this verse could refer to the training for the athletes. Even that did little eternal good. There was very little monetary gain by winning the race or

combat games. All the expensive training was done for recognition by fans and pride of winning. Godliness gives rewards now and in the next world and the training is not nearly as difficult. The return on godliness is much greater than physical exercise. This is not the verse to justify no "bodily exercise" since the body is the temple of the Holy Ghost. God deserves more than a badly maintained temple. This exercise was done at a public facility for that purpose. Consistent with the expense of clothing, these exercises were done naked and a bath house was usually attached to the facility. The exercise was usually preceded with a massage with oil and followed by scraping the oil and collected dust off with a scraper made for the purpose and then the bath before putting the clothing back on.

Phl 2:16 Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain. The "word of life" could easily be the gospel. The "day of Christ" is the end of time when Christ has put all his enemies under His control. The phrase "not run in vain" means you won the crown for the race. "Neither labored in vain" means you did not go through all the training and practices with nothing to show for your effort and expenses. The Apostle Paul is saying, I made a total commitment so I am not wasting my time and effort, as would be the case if I labored halfheartedly. An athlete with only a halfhearted effort does not win many races.

Gal 2:2, And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain. This is part of the Apostle Paul's past life story. He is checking with the other church leaders to be sure what Christ has revealed to him fits with what He revealed to them. He wants to be sure of the rules of the race, so he is not disqualified for not following the rules. He is also saying that he is not the disciple of any of the other Apostles. Mathew Henry thinks Paul is trying to avoid a controversy among the church leaders which often destroys a lot of hard work. He

did not want his work made vain (he ran in vain) by an avoidable conflict.

Gal 5:7 Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth? An excerpt from Vine's entry on BLB: "in Gal 5:7 of the erstwhile faithful course doctrinally of the Galatian believers;" It is like they started the race with a good start off the blocks and were running in their lane according to the rules and someone pushed them out of their lane or tripped them with a false doctrine. What caused you to leave the truth for a false doctrine? Paul is trying to teach the Galatians to be more careful of what doctrines they follow i.e. learn to think for yourselves instead of blindly following what ever comes along.

2Ti 4:7 I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: The first part of the verse would be boxing or wrestling. The winner was the one that held out till his opponent admitted defeat or was still alive after his opponent died. Since Paul's opponent is Satan who will never admit defeat or die, Paul can not declare himself winner of the fight. "I have finished my course" is a phrase from racing that is used here metaphorically for the things Paul was given to accomplish for Christ.

2Ti 4:8 Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. This verse is comparing the awards ceremony at the games to the similar ceremony at the marriage feast in heaven. The judges mentioned here were also the referees for the events so they got a close view of the contest and should have made a fair judgement although most winners were obvious. As all things involving humans, there was probably some bad calls and some bribery, but Jesus will not make any bad calls He knows and sees everything, and He already owns everything so He can not be bribed. That is were the righteous judge comes in.

2Ti 2:5 **And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully.** An athlete caught breaking the rules was not only disqualified from the event, he or the city-state he represented could be fined. One article I read said the fine money was used to make a statue to Zeus and the offence and name of the city-state was engraved on the statue. The photo that they showed was of the stone bases for the statues. How they could tell what was on the statue from that is hard to guess. The point the Apostle Paul is making is, there are rules for the Christian life and there is no reward for doing it your way or even my way unless it agrees with The Way. Jesus said, "I am the way..." so there is no other "way". You can not get to heaven by good works without Jesus. Your good works could look like the works of Saul of Tarsus before his conversion.

Paul's illustrations seem quite different than what Jesus was using. I can not think of an illustration from the games in the Gospels. They were all related to earning a living. Maybe the Jews were barred from attending the games or the taxes kept them too poor to attend. The more we learn the lifestyle of the times, the better we will understand what the Author is saying. If we are trying to explain spiritual ideas, we need illustrations that will be understood by the hearers.

The key to all of the sports illustrations that the Apostle Paul was using is that in every event the participants would have been naked. So, here we have the most influential Apostle of the New Testament age using illustrations in his sermons and writings that would have brought mental imagery into the minds of his hearers and readers of naked participants...without apology or hesitation. Why, because nakedness was both commonplace and non-sexual.