

Cereal Box Christians

Doug Hamilton

Part III) We are to Celebrate like Cereal Box Christians.

We are in a series in recognition of the recent Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver. Athletes from all over the world assembled to compete for the gold in a number of events. By the time it was over, Canada had garnered more gold medals and the United States more overall medals in Winter Olympic history. Those who follow these things were treated to a great competition. There will be many new faces on the boxes of Wheaties in the near future, for that is the mark of a Champion in sports.

What if heaven issued boxes of cereal with champion athletes of the faith on them? Would you be on one? The New Testament writers very often would use events from the ancient Olympics to illustrate a Christian's walk with Jesus. It is in one of these passages that we defined the three lesson series titled "Cereal Box Christians".

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Three Points

1. We are to PRACTICE like Cereal Box Christians.

In the first lesson we studied the correlation to our everyday practice sessions concerning the way we live. Just like a champion athlete will spend many years in training for his opportunity to be on the Wheaties box, the Christian must be willing to train hard for the Lord. Unless we are willing to Practice like a Cereal Box Christian, we should never expect to be on the heavenly Wheaties Box.

2. We are to COMPETE like Cereal Box Christians.

In the second lesson we covered the life of a champion first-century Olympic Athlete and the level of intensity that is needed to compete like a Champion. The Christian in the like way also must be intense in their toughest times of proving. All those practice sessions of righteousness will be for naught if we are not willing to Compete like Cereal Box Christians.

3. We are to CELEBRATE like Cereal Box Christians.

In the third and final lesson of the series we will cover the celebration of the first-century Champion athlete and compare it to the Christian's life today. We will clearly see that if we want to be a Cereal Box Christian that we must Celebrate like a Cereal Box Christian.

Nobody understood this better than Paul the apostle, for even at the point of death he understood what it was like to be a "Cereal Box Christian". While awaiting his execution in a Roman prison, he reflected on champion athletes of the games of that day and envisioned himself on that box.

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2 Timothy 4:6-8 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;⁸ in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

Some of the ancient writers recorded that Paul was led out of his dungeon cell shortly thereafter and beheaded on one of the Seven Hills of Rome for the crime of preaching the gospel of Christ. Even while writing this passage with that pending possibility of gloom, he was able to envision that he had victory within his grasp.

A) He fought the good fight.

The word used by Paul for fight is the same for that of a contest in the arena for either boxing or wrestling. These were some of the more gruesome sports of the Olympics because there was no resting nor rules.

Paul used the same language two other times in his writings to Timothy the evangelist:

- 1 Tim 1:18 This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may fight the good fight,
- 1 Tim 6:12 “Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called...”

In the contact sports of the Olympic Games, the two men simply boxed or grappled it out until the other one was either maimed, unconscious or dead. There is something of great interest in relation to the last outcome, for if a competitor died in the contest, the one who died was automatically declared the winner by the judge. Apparently Paul could see that he was about to lose his competition against the world, but he would have his Victory declared by Righteous Judge in heaven!

When we came up out of the waters of baptism, we entered an arena of the world, fighting with every ounce of our strength. We fight and claw for every inch of ground and yet we still stumble. We fight temptation; we fight sickness; we fight poverty; we fight sorrow; we fight pain; and somehow we survive. Yet there will come a day when you will meet that greatest opponent of this world called Death and you will lose. Our best will never be good enough, but Christ is and if we are hanging onto His cross and walking in the light, we will be on that cereal box on that day of resurrection! So fight the good fight and Celebrate like a Cereal Box Christian!

B) He finished the course.

Once again, Paul reaches into the language of the Olympic Games to describe his present situation. Paul's life in Christ was like that of a race. It had a beginning when he submitted to Christ at baptism in Acts 9.

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- He continued this race to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. *Philippians 2:16* “...holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.”
- He did not run this race while looking in the past but pressing forward to the goal of heaven. *Phil 3:13* “Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of {it} yet; but one thing {I do} forgetting what {lies} behind and reaching forward to what {lies} ahead...”
- He ran in such a way that he was determined to win the prize. *1 Cor 9:24* “...Run in such a way that you may win.”

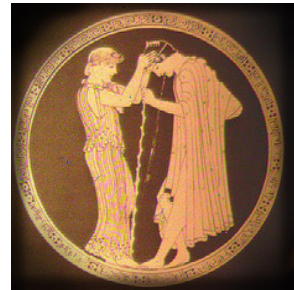
There was a famous story in that day that was often discussed in Paul’s day called the Battle of Marathon. It was between the Greeks and Persians and was one of the most decisive battles of all-time. Against great odds, the Greeks defeated the Persians and a messenger was sent running from Marathon to Athens to announce the great news. He ran from the end of the day and through the night over difficult roads and paths without break. Upon arrival, he yelled out to the rulers, “Rejoice! We have conquered!” Those were the last words he spoke for he collapsed and died from exhaustion. This is where the name for the longest race of the Olympics derives its origin, for it began at Marathon.

Paul has been serving Jesus for years, through treacherous paths of beatings, shipwrecks, imprisonments, persecutions, hunger and thirst, pain, sorrow and joy. He has now come to the end of the journey that was longer than any marathon and was still proclaiming, “Rejoice! We have conquered! Can we not Celebrate like a Cereal Box Christian???”

C) He kept the faith.

The Olympic Games were the most popular events of Paul’s day and all were quite familiar with them. One of the practices that the athletes would carry out prior to their events was a solemn oath before the gods that they had trained at least ten months prior to the games and would not resort to any trickery to win. This was what they referred as the “keeping of the faith” of the games, which was fairness and faithfulness to the sport and the country they represented. Perhaps Paul was saying that he kept in good faith the standards of the God that called him into that arena of Christianity.

All this would line up with the crown of life that Paul says was waiting for him at the finish line for that was Olympic Games vernacular. The Olympic athlete competed with a prize of great honor in mind. If you were a champion of an event, you would receive the following: 1) Tax-exempt status for life 2) Front row seats to all future Olympic Games and 3) An olive-branch wreath crown called the *stephanos* that was to be personally placed on you. This was the crown that Paul was referring to, the crown of a Cereal Box Christian!



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- James 1:12 Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which {the Lord} has promised to those who love Him.
- 1 Pet 5:4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.
- Rev 2:10 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

It is tough at times being a Christian, but fight the good fight of a champion, run the race of a champion, compete like a champion and you will receive the crown of a champion placed on you by the Caesar's Caesar, the Lord Jesus Christ! Jesus will give you the victory so celebrate like a Cereal Box Christian!

While addressing the Corinthians of Greece, the nation that hosted the Olympics, Paul the apostle encouraged them to improve their poor performance for Jesus by using the "language of the games". He said in *1 Corinthians 9:25 Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable*. It is important to note that the wreath he was referring to was that crown of an olive branch. That crown would look brand new for the day it was placed on the champion's head, but in a few weeks or months it would completely disintegrate. He used the perishable crown and contrasted it to the imperishable crown that the Christian has in the end. This is all done to encourage them to have some self-control for the cause of Christ.

Following the progression of the text, he says in...

- 10:1-13 Remember Israel did not finish their path.
- 10:14-33 Make sure to flee idolatry and serve Christ.
- 11:1-34 Make sure to have order in worship.
- 12:1-31 Make sure to be unified.
- 13:1-13 Make sure to put love first.
- 14:1-40 Make sure to have proper instruction.
- 15:1-58 Make sure to be gospel-focused.

It is in this last-mentioned section that we find Paul revisiting the Olympic theme with a powerful application. The people of the day considered their sports heroes just below the level of royalty. They loved them so much that they tried to immortalize them by doing things like carving a marble statue of their image, putting their names on pillars and writing sonnets about their great victories. They felt it was their obligation for the coming generations to know what great champions they had. With that in mind, let us read the following passage from 1 Cor 15.



1 Corinthians 15:51-58 Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound,

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*and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.*⁵³ *For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.*⁵⁴ *But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, “DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory.”*⁵⁵ *“O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?”*⁵⁶ *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law;*⁵⁷ *but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

He was borrowing the prior terms from perishable and imperishable wreaths and applied them to the Christian that dies faithful in Christ. He basically said that the Christian's body is perishable and must become imperishable. He said our body is mortal and must put on immortality. We become immortal like the Olympic champions because we have been crowned with that crown. The word that Paul uses “victory” is *nikos*. It is the Greek word for *Nike*, the goddess that was depicted as carrying the victory wreath of the champions. Greeks believed that when a champion was crowned that it was symbolic of Nike herself personally doing the honor.



Brothers and sisters, on that Great Day of Resurrection, when the Lord shall raise all from the dead, you will see how great that victory is! You will be raised incorruptible and imperishable. That is the true crown that the Righteous Judge God places on our heads. This should cause us to celebrate with great joy. This is the Victory that we have in Jesus, eternal life! If you can't Celebrate that fact, then what will it take?

Victory in Jesus

I heard an old, old story, How a Savior came from glory,
How He gave His life on Calvary To save a wretch like me;
I heard about His groaning, Of His precious blood's atoning,
Then I repented of my sins And won the victory.

I heard about a mansion He has built for me in glory.
And I heard about the streets of gold Beyond the crystal sea;
About the angels singing, And the old redemption story,
And some sweet day I'll sing up there The song of victory.

Chorus

O victory in Jesus, My Savior, forever.
He sought me and bought me With His redeeming blood;
He loved me ere I knew Him And all my love is due Him,
He plunged me to victory, Beneath the cleansing flood.

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In Closing:

The recorders of the NT felt compelled to use Olympic athletics to communicate important points of instruction to the Christians. In the last three lessons, we have done the same with boxes of Wheaties. We probably will never personally know someone who will be on a box of cereal, but we can make sure we are on God's Cereal Box by practicing, competing and celebrating like a champion.