

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The Beijing Olympics – and running the race of life

Presented by John Edmondstone

A couple of weeks ago the Olympic Games commenced in Beijing, China. Such activity is solidly rooted in history. I'm sure you can recognize the music playing in the background. Listen for a moment – it's *Chariots of Fire*, the theme of a marvellous film made in the 1980s about Eric Liddell, known as the Flying Scotsman – a challenging life.

I want this morning to tie that in with a passage from the New Testament in Hebrews 12 which challenges us to “run with patience the race that is set before us”. Listen now to the reading of the New Testament passage from Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1 to 3 from the New International version of the Bible.

‘Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.’

In the preceding chapter the author made reference to the heroes of the past, their suffering and achievements but now he turns to the greatest of them all, Jesus Christ. He had warned His disciples and any other followers the race of life would be very difficult. They could expect a hard and sometimes painful track to follow but it would be immensely rewarding and to demonstrate that, chapter 11 of the Book of Hebrews lists a great crowd of witnesses who inspire us. But the key is to look to Jesus who not only offers a perfect example, but also gives us the strength. The description of the Christian life as a race was quite familiar to all readers of the New Testament. The author uses vivid language to describe WHAT THEY MUST REJECT, HOW THEY MUST RUN AND WHERE THEY MUST LOOK.

I mentioned the popular film ‘Chariots of Fire’ a film that won the award for best picture of the year in 1981. While the film contained some additions of imagination it was nonetheless a record of an outstanding young man, Eric Liddell, known as the Flying Scotsman. Indeed there's a book of the same name written by Sally Magnusson.

Eric Liddell was a fine athlete and a deeply committed Christian, so much so he refused to run in the 100 metres in the 1924 Olympic Games to be held in Paris. A fellow student said Eric didn't make a fuss about it; he just quietly said “I'm not running on a Sunday.” Reverence for the Sabbath was as natural to Eric as breathing and infinitely more precious than a gold medal. We'll return to the story a little later.

Turning to Hebrews 12, the Christian readers to whom the letter was addressed were reminded to lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily entangles. Have you seen an athlete try to run in an overcoat or heavy clothing? Of course equally they do not carry superfluous weight. So the Christian in running the race of life, burdened by ungodly habits and acts that weigh them down, mar their fellowship with their

Master. We need to examine our lives carefully to enable us to face up to the habits and attitudes that are a hindrance to our growth in our Christian life.

By the way, I use the term ‘Christian’ to describe any person who has turned over their lives to Jesus Christ, who recognize their need of a Saviour and know that His death on a cross was for them and that the cross brings heaven and earth together. Having accepted all that God has done in Christ for us opens the way to live in fellowship with Him and run the race of life knowing that there are those things we must reject. Remember, Hebrews 12:1 “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (the saints of the past) let us lay aside every thing that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.”

After the song, we’ll take another step.

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We have noted so far in verse 1 of Hebrews 12 “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witness, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” We’ve looked at WHAT WE MUST REJECT; now let’s look at how WE MUST RUN. In the race of life we are to run with perseverance or endurance.

Eric Liddell, was the hero of “Chariots of Fire”. There is no doubt he was a man of perseverance and endurance. When he withdrew on principle from the 100 metres he was asked to train for the 400 metres. That was how he discovered that he was a natural quarter-miler. Had he not persevered with his principles he would never have known that the 400 metres was really his race. At the Paris Olympics of 1924, Eric Liddell won the 400 metres race in record time. Christianity that demands endurance or perseverance is much more than an uncommitted stroll through life.

In the passage we are told “Jesus endured the cross” and also that before His death from evil doers there was such hostility against Him. It is not unusual for His followers to experience opposition, pain, and rejection. History records not just in the past but in the present the suffering of believers for their Christian faith. Mature believers know that the life to which they have committed themselves has incomparable compensations but also makes rigorous demands. Being a Christian does not guarantee health, wealth and happiness. Those things may be the lot of some but more often there will be a price to pay the result will be something deeper, joy in following Christ.

Running the race of life is not something we do on our own. We have the presence of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit that carries us through the times of testing that come to all of us. How we must run – with perseverance.

But there’s another point to note if we are to run the race of life, “WHERE WE MUST LOOK” as we read on in Hebrews 12 verses 2 and 3. In the course of running the race Christians must keep their eyes directed firmly and continually on the Lord Jesus Himself. It means deliberately shifting one’s gaze from anything that distracts or detracts from running the race well.

There was a time when St. Paul wrote of a former fellow worker, “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world.” Yes, there is much to distract us, often attractive, promising rich rewards and success. Often such distractions are short lived but are enough to cause us to take our eyes off Jesus and leave the track. Has that been your experience? You can begin again to RUN THE RACE OF LIFE well by fixing your eyes on Jesus. To do that you need to join a good fellowship of Christians, study His word carefully in the Bible and share your faith.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. He is the compassionate Jesus. He made the lame to walk, the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the dumb to speak and spoke the words “Neither do I condemn you, go sin no more” and “I will be with you always” or from the record by the beloved disciple (John 14) “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am.”

Eric Liddell, the Flying Scotsman, the central figure of the film “Chariots of Fire” was a man who ran well on the field of athletics but was so strong in running the race of life well that he neither drank or gambled but was a man of joy, commitment and concern for others, a man with a wonderful sense of humour. He was loved by fellow Scots and students of Edinburgh University.

His wife, Florence, was ten years younger than he. They had two children and then later a third, Maureen, a child he was never to see. He went as a missionary to China but it was a time of turmoil and war and he finally died in a Japanese internment camp on February 21, 1945 after falling prey to a fatal disease. Its effects were slow and painful. He left a legacy of faith and a great testimony to the Lord he served.

Those who wish to run the race with perseverance must also “look to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2)

We’ve reminded ourselves today that the Olympic Games are on in Beijing. I’ve chosen a passage in the New Testament from Hebrews 12:1-3 that is based on the ancient games out of which our games in the modern era have come. I’ve also referred to a fine young man who was both a great athlete, and a fine Christian, Eric Liddell, quoting from a book by Sally Magnusson, “The Flying Scotsman” written in 1981 and reprinted many times and also the film “Chariots of Fire” the Hollywood version of Liddell’s life and we’ve used the beautiful theme from the film.

Acknowledging all of that, I hope you will pick up a New Testament and read the letter to the Hebrews chapter 12. Above all, I hope that all I have said today will spur you on so that you run the race of life with your faith firmly fixed in Jesus Christ. This is my prayer for you.

“Father, we all have a need for forgiveness which only you can grant us. Help us to fix our faith firmly in your Son, Jesus Christ, for only in that way can we run the race well.”