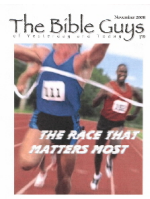


## The Race That Matters Most

Written by David McNabb

Saturday, 10 January 2009 21:46 - Last Updated Tuesday, 14 July 2009 17:41

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The year 2008 has could possibly be dubbed “the year of races.” With the Olympics and the quest to elect the next president, we have seen several ways to pursue the prize. Then there has been the focus on (and efforts to shift the focus from) another type of race, as America marched towards the election of her first African-American Commander-in-Chief.

Racing (and organized sports in general) is a veritable breeding ground for the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21): variance, emulations, wrath, strife, and seditions, to name a few that are present in nearly every contest. The concept of competition is first seen in the Bible in the story of Cain and Able, but was originally born out of Lucifer’s pride. He desired to be the top banana, and challenged God for control of heaven.

So, we watched as all the nations came together in peace and harmony in Beijing, so that they could prove their superiority to each other. The dichotomy of purpose that is inherent in the Olympic Games is striking, is it not? Despite the media’s attempts to put forth a personal story, and to make it about individuals, still you have nations cheating, or making accusations of cheating, because it is not about peace, hope, love, and harmony – it is about winning.

Certainly, there are individuals, and even nationalities, that excel in certain things. American swimmer Michael Phelps became a household name as he won a record-setting 8 gold medals, winning every event in which he participated and shattering world records along the way. Jamaicans, Ethiopians, and Kenyans proved their track and field abilities in the 2008 Olympics, just as they have in marathons around the world. American and Chinese domination in gymnastics was both expected and achieved.

While there are the “favorites,” we still know that there is always the possibility of the upset. Solomon knew this truth, too. He said, “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race *is* not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of

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understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so

*are*

the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them” (Eccl 9:11-12). That is the reason that sports draw spectators. Not only to see the superiority of one over the other, but also because of the chance that the favorite is beaten by the underdog.

The statistically best team does not always win. The world record holder does not always come in first. The best driver still occasionally crashes into the wall. The genius does not always get the patent. All are subject to God’s law of “time and chance.” Neither Jacob, nor Esau, had done anything good or bad when God chose Jacob in the womb.

In the case of Cain and Able, another truth is seen. Able won God’s favor because his heart was right. Cain lost because his heart was evil. However, God showed that the “race” to live a life pleasing to Him is not a “zero sum game.” He told Cain that he, too, would be accepted if he mended his ways.

In one aspect, there need not be losers. All could live a life of service to God, and please Him, if they so choose. Still, that does not preclude the biblical concept of “election.” Election, in God’s economy, is not necessarily based on merit, but on His sovereignty – His right and will to choose.

The presidential election of 2008 had its own nuances. Two very different leadership approaches were on display, and the American people were given a chance to analyze both and make a decision on Election Day. Clearly opposing ideas about taxes, military action, energy solutions, and the economy were all presented, and pundits tried to predict the outcome. As with any race, there was a favorite and there was an underdog, and there were fans for both teams. Many expected the ultimate outcome, but, still, there was the chance that the underdog would emerge surprisingly victorious. It was, as they say, a “nail-biter.” There were moments of gracious dialogue, and other moments of vicious attacks. The stakes – and the emotions – were high. In the end, there could be only one winner. As they announced Mr. Obama as the victor, every color of the emotional spectrum was seen: from adulation to disbelief, from tears of joy to tears of defeat. Such is the nature of competition.

And, speaking of color, this presidential election presented another aspect of “race.” For the

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first time in American history, an African-American had a legitimate shot at the White House. Oh, others have tried, but none had even succeeded to be the party's candidate. Not only Americans, but people around the world watched to see if the Melting Pot would, or could, elect someone who was not white.

I have no doubt that since the first differences emerged among men, the races have tried to prove their superiority over one another, even as it is human nature to prove our superiority on an individual level. That tendency has reared its ugly head throughout history, sometimes reaching a horrendous apex as many nations over the years have believed themselves to be the master race. Once again, it is painfully obvious that races of any kind are hotbeds for the works of the flesh. In the end, we war against one another to our own detriment, and, in the race of the "races," there are no winners.

The apostle Paul used races as an object lesson. He said "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: 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" (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

Paul shows that those who strive to win in this world, recognize the cost involved. Whatever the goal, those who really want to win are willing to make the requisite sacrifices. In spite of the Scriptural truth that there is nothing better for a man, but to eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of his labors, athletes maintain strict diets and exercise regimens. For example, a wrestler may have to forego a meal and eat only ice to "make weight" for a coming match.

The same is true in the entertainment, business and political environments. Those with an earnest desire to win, to excel, are willing to pay the price. They will sacrifice time with their family and friends. They will put in the effort to learn the needed skills. They will practice and practice, until they have mastered it. In politics, they strive to watch every word, lest they should be quoted time and again in the public arena. They walk the fine line between digging up enough mud on the opponent to make him look bad, while not too much to make himself look mean and vindictive. They will spend countless amounts of money. Regardless of the prize, our brothers in the world know that there is a price to pay – and the winners are willing to pay it.

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Paul said that they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but that we do it for an incorruptible one. Whether you are receiving a crown of olive branches, or gold medals, the reward is “corruptible.” You may set the world record today, only to have it shattered by another tomorrow. Or you may have excelled in every qualifying race, only to be beaten in the one for the gold. Your leaves may eventually wither, and your gold be lost, stolen or forgotten. Yet, knowing all of that, people still do what it takes to win.

Yet, when it comes to a crown of righteousness, do we truly and soberly strive? Certainly, salvation is a gift, received not through works, but through God’s abundant grace. However, Paul speaks of a crown which can be attained *if* we fight the good fight, finish the course, and keep the faith (2 Tim. 4:7-9). Paul told Timothy that Christ would give a crown to “all them also that love his appearing.” This is not merely describing those who claim to be Christians, and speak favorably of Christ’s return someday. This is speaking of saints who desire His coming, and are obedient to the Savior, and are willing to do whatever it takes to hasten His appearing.

Peter agreed in 2 Peter 1:2-11. First he spoke of the grace of God, and the free gift which we have received of Him. “Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that [pertain] unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

Then he gives us instructions of what we must do to “strive for masteries” for our incorruptible crown. “And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make [you that ye shall] neither [be] barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to ***make your calling and election sure***: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

There is nothing you can ***do*** to enter the kingdom of God, as we all know and confess. But if we do these things, which Peter has written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, our entry in the kingdom will be one of abundance. The white robe is a gift. The crown is a prize.

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When the king of Persia sought a queen, all of the fair maidens were brought to the palace. Esther, at the behest of Mordecai, went as well. She knew that, to be the king's wife, she would have to do all of the things that pleased the king. She had to leave her adoptive father and mother, put off her customs, and strive to align her ways with the ways of her perspective husband. When she went in unto King Ahasuerus, she took only what the chamberlain recommended. In her quest for the crown, she did whatever it took. Her efforts paid off, and she was chosen.

When the prophecy declares, "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7), we know that it cannot fail. Will we be content to be called, or do we desire to also be chosen? Salvation comes by grace. Election requires dedication, consecration, obedience, and faith.

The wife **will** make herself ready unto the coming of our Lord, of that there can be no doubt. We must fall in love with the appearing of our Lord, and determine within ourselves to lay aside every weight, and the evil heart of unbelief, and run with patience the race that is set before us, if we are to win this race that matters most. Amen.