

Our Race Continues – ‘Going for Gold’

A Christian's life moves in continuous cycles of training and testing. We run a race that requires goal-setting, improving our performance and struggling against the environment and our own weaknesses.

Four years evaporated before our eyes. The Olympic Games of Sydney 2000 soon became Athens 2004. Yet shortly after the final events in Sydney, coaches and aspiring sports enthusiasts began planning for the next opportunity to become the best in their field. Goals were set and training programmes worked out. Now all that hard work of fine-tuning healthy bodies has brought medals and honour to those who have excelled.

Why athletes compete

Not everyone can be British middle-distance runner Kelly Holmes, winner of two gold medals. Although many British and European competitors returned home without a medal, they will still take with them much invaluable experience. They will never be the same, nor view their national competitions in the same way.

Frenchman Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern

series of Olympic Games, observed in 1908: ‘The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.’ These words are displayed on the scoreboard at opening ceremonies to remind athletes of why they are competing.

The Christian race

A Christian's life also moves in continuous cycles of training and testing. We run a race that requires goal-setting, improving our performance and struggling against our own weaknesses as well as the ‘competition’.

The apostle Paul refers to this training in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27: ‘Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a

crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize’ (New International Version).

Paul knew that, for a Christian, winning the gold medal of life also requires self-discipline. An Olympic athlete must compete according to the rules of the games – witness prominent athletes who were disqualified from or not allowed to participate in this year's Games. So also our Christian life is bound by rules which we must follow to be awarded life without end (2 Timothy 2:5).

These are found in the spiritual intent of the law of God (Matthew 5:17-48).

The best coach

We have the help of the best coach. Jesus Christ has already

successfully run the race of human life, setting us an example, and He knows how to train and work with us.

This truth is made plain by an important passage in Hebrews: 'Looking unto Jesus, *the author and finisher of our faith*' (Hebrews 12:2, emphasis added throughout). Christ is also called the captain of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10). An athlete's diligent preparation only gains him a medal or a wreath that soon withers, but the Christian strives for an imperishable crown.

At each Olympic Games we see national heroes fall short of their country's expectations. A strained ligament or a poor performance on a 'bad day'. Does this stop a dedicated athlete in preparing for the next Games? Not in the least.

In the same way there are setbacks and short-term defeats in our Christian lives. We each need to learn how to gracefully accept a defeat and humbly enjoy a victory. 'I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound,' Paul said (Philippians 4:12).

Encouragement, help and support

In recent years TV cameras have captured the moods of competing teams. We see their expressions of euphoria as they boost the team score with a good performance. We also see team members give encouragement to those who may have let the team down. It is inspiring to see such support for a fellow teammate.

These examples should also reflect the attitude of Christians towards each other. We all fall short at times. And during those occasions, we would prefer encouragement to criticism. Jesus Christ said that this type of loving camaraderie would be a sign that His disciples are listening to His coaching. He stated: 'By this all will know that

you are My disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35).

Just as we are able to view the successes of former Olympic champions on television, in print or on film, we have a record of many Hebrew patriarchs, prophets, and kings as well as early Christians who have run their spiritual race successfully (see Hebrews 11; James 5:10-11; 1 Corinthians 11:1).

They should inspire us to be living examples of God's standards in a world that has rejected them, and if we do stumble at times, to get up and train even harder. 'For though a righteous man falls seven times, *he rises again*' (Proverbs 24:16, NIV).

Running with endurance

Paul writes again to his fellow Christian 'athletes' to look to the examples of people who have succeeded in life's race for the ultimate goal – the real medal of eternal life that only God can impart. 'Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.' (Hebrews 12:1, NIV).

*Peter Hawkins,
Pastor of the United Church of God
congregations in Bricket Wood and
Tonbridge, England*

Reflecting a Millennial Attitude

A Good News article written shortly after the Sydney Olympic Games contains many helpful points that you may wish to access and read about (see reference at conclusion). The following quote from the article will help us appreciate that the race for eternal life is one that we all can win in the end. This prize is one we all may share, together, for eternity. Together, we can 'go for gold'!

'Although Olympic teams enter the stadium at the opening ceremony carrying their national flags, the closing ceremony is designed to highlight unity as if all the athletes belonged to one unified world. This concept came about during the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne because of 17-year-old John Ian Wing. During the days just before those games, the world was in turmoil. As the teams made their way to

Australia, Soviet tanks and troops entered Budapest to put down the Hungarian uprising.

'A few days after the opening ceremony John Wing wrote a letter to the organising committee. He suggested a different kind of march for the closing ceremony: "During the march there will be only one nation . . . What more could anybody want if the whole world could be made as one nation?"

'So it was done, and this march with a different attitude has become a tradition that has lasted for all Olympic Games – athletes from many nations saying farewell as one body, instead of marching separately under their own national flags' (Graemme Marshall, 'The Olympic Ideal', GN Sept-Oct 2000).

The Certainty of Christ's Return

Both the New and Old Testament Scriptures completely uphold the promised assurance of Christ's second coming. We look at some often-neglected biblical evidence from the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew Scriptures known as the Old Testament provide much prophetic evidence for the second coming of Jesus Christ. Although the New Testament abundantly refers to Christ's return with a large variety of references, the vital undergirding proof is revealed in the prophecies of the Old Testament. Regrettably, Christians often neglect the role of the Hebrew Bible.

Beginning in Genesis

The concept of a Deliverer or Messiah who was to come and deliver mankind from the slavery of sin is found in the very early writings of the Holy Scriptures. In Genesis 3:15 it is implied that in spite of sin having separated him from God, our Creator would find a remedy to restore this broken relationship. At this point nothing else is stated except that the Deliverer to come will be born of a woman. In Genesis 3:15 Satan the devil is depicted in conflict with the woman, from whom the Deliverer would come.

For the next

2,000 years, until we get to the time of Abraham, nothing more is directly revealed in the Scriptures about this future deliverance of man.

In Genesis 22:17-18, God told Abraham that through him, the nations of the earth would be blessed both physically and spiritually. The spiritual blessing pertains to the Deliverer that God would send. So Abraham understood, at least in part, that the Messiah to come, to be born of a woman, would be his descendant.

Here we see that the future salvation of humanity would come through the Hebrew peoples. Later Jesus Christ told the Samaritan woman that 'salvation is of the Jews' (John 4:22). That is why it is so vital that we also concern

ourselves with the holy writings of the Hebrew people, the Old Testament, to reveal God's will and plan for mankind. The New Testament reveals the intent of the Old Testament and refines God's plan even more. Both constitute the written Word of God.

In Deuteronomy 18:18, Moses told the Israelites that God would raise up, at some time in the future, another great Prophet (identified by biblical scholars as the Messiah Himself). To which of the 12 tribes of Israel would that Prophet appear? Genesis 49:10 clearly points to the tribe being Judah.

The evidence of Isaiah

In Isaiah 7:14, we learn more about the Messiah. He is *Immanuel* in Hebrew, meaning 'God with us'. Therefore, we see that the Saviour of all mankind will come from God and is God, a member of the divine family. In Isaiah 9:6 the prophet tells us under inspiration: 'Unto us a Child is born. Unto us a Son is given . . .' The *us* refers to the tribe or nation of Judah (see Isaiah 1:1 where



At the sound of the last trumpet, Jesus Christ will return to the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:3-4; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

this major prophet is connected with Judah). The rest of the verse in Isaiah 9 describes some attributes of the Messiah. In verse 7 we are told that the Messiah will sit on David's throne (cf. Jeremiah 23:5-6). The House of David will provide the Messiah, and any person claiming to be that Anointed One would have to possess a direct lineage from the House of David of the tribe of Judah.

Isaiah 53:4-5 refers to the Messiah initially being a suffering Saviour rather than a conquering king. We know that the people of Judah, under Roman rule 2,000 years ago, would have had no difficulty welcoming a conquering king as the Messiah. They erroneously thought the Anointed One would repulse the Romans from the Holy Land and give the tribe of Judah its independence. They didn't understand that Isaiah had revealed some 700 years earlier that the Messiah would first come as a humble, merciful Benefactor to deliver His people from spiritual bondage and to atone for their sins (verses 10-11).

Apparently Isaiah himself desired to see the coming Saviour of Israel and the world before he died. This Hebrew prophet wrote: 'Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down! That the mountains might shake at Your presence . . . that the nations may tremble at Your presence' (Isaiah 64:1). But that was not yet to be. Even Christ's first coming did not occur during his lifetime. Isaiah would have had to wait almost 700 years for that benchmark event.

No one can say with accuracy that Christ's second coming will take place in a particular year that we as human beings might specify.

Scripture clearly spells out the *event* of His return but not the specific *time*. Anyone who seriously suggests a particular date for Christ's second coming is being inconsistent with the Bible, and disbelieves what Christ Himself stated about the day of His return (Matthew 24:36).

Other related prophecies

In Micah 5:1 we learn that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, near Jerusalem in Judea. The exact location is given

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here for the first time. We come to the time when the Jews were taken into Babylonian captivity. The Scriptures had made it plain to them that the prophesied Deliverer would come through the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10).

Scripture reflects the keen disappointment of a people who had been promised so much and waited so long, and yet their messianic expectations had remained unfulfilled. Notice how their state of affairs is described by the psalmist. Here we read of their plight, their frustrations, and the time of supreme testing of their faith. 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion [Jerusalem]' (Psalm 137:1-4). They did not understand that the coming of the Messiah would not happen in their lifetime.

In Babylon God used a man who was not an Israelite to bring about the return to Judaea of the Jewish captives. Cyrus, a Medo-Persian king, was given the commission to begin to restore the freedom that would result in the resettlement of the Holy Land (see

Isaiah 45:1) – preparing the way for the first coming of Jesus Christ.

For those Christians who sometimes doubt whether Christ will come again, there is a lesson here. It concerns *time*. We as human beings are limited in our understanding of time. God isn't! The prophecies of Christ's first coming were not fulfilled the next day, the next year or the year after. Centuries passed until the time was right in the eyes of God (see Galatians 4:4).

Our Creator has revealed the basic outline of His plan and purpose for humankind to His people. The details,

however, including the exact time element, remain within His power and authority (Acts 1:6-7).

New Testament evidence

When we come to the time of John the Baptist, there is an air of expectation in and around Jerusalem that something is about to happen. So when John the Baptist began to preach, at first some believed he was the Messiah. People even asked him about it. Of course, he rightly denied that he was the One to come and pointed to Jesus as God's Anointed One (see John 1:19-31).

The fact that Jesus Christ came to earth and began His ministry of reconciliation, where He plays the most essential role as Saviour, is an established aspect of the overall evidence. Yet the promise of His first coming was issued many centuries before it actually occurred. As time progressed, the Hebrew prophets continued to highlight a coming Saviour, but Israel, Judah and the world at large had to wait a long, long time. Yet

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How Is the Publishing of the Gospel Financed?

How do we meet the publishing and postal costs of the magazines, the study course and all the booklets?

Jesus Christ assigned to His Church the work of proclaiming the gospel to the world and that of making disciples and caring for those whom God calls (Matthew 28:19-20; John 21:15-18). This is a massive undertaking, yet, at any one time, God calls only a 'little flock' of people into the Church to accomplish this immense task (Luke 12:32).

Christ instructed His disciples: 'Freely you have received, freely give' (Matthew 10:8). God's whole way of life is a way of giving and serving. So it comes as no surprise that Jesus told His disciples *to share the gospel without charge*. Today God's truth continues to go out free to those who request it.

But there is a financial cost that somehow must be met. What is the biblical pattern God gives us for financing the work of preaching and publishing the gospel?

Abraham's faithful example

The Bible introduces God's financial support system through the example of the patriarch Abraham in Genesis 14. His example is a reflection of the need to consider the significance of the Eternal's role as the Creator of heaven and earth. God created everything, including all the physical resources we are allowed to use during our lifetime. He tells us that *everything* belongs to Him

(Psalm 24:1; Haggai 2:8). Divine ownership carries with it the right to govern the use of the resources God has so generously provided for men and women.

God revealed His way of life to Abraham, who was an outstanding example of how to live it. 'Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My

God created everything, including all the physical resources we are allowed to use during our lifetime.

charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws' (Genesis 26:5). Abraham also knew that all physical blessings are a gift from God. As 'the father of all those who believe' (Romans 4:11), Abraham set the example of tithing – giving one tenth of the blessings He received from God to Melchizedek, priest of the Most High God (Genesis 14:17-20; Hebrews 7:1-4) – reflecting his partnership with God. (If you would like to understand the true identity of Melchizedek, please request our free booklet *Who Is God?*)

Abraham passed the practice of tithing on to his descendants. His grandson Jacob said: 'If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God . . . and of all that You

give me I will surely give a tenth to You' (Genesis 28:20-22, emphasis added throughout).

When the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob became the nation of ancient Israel, certain laws were formally codified after their deliverance from Egyptian bondage. God instructed that tithes were to be given to the tribe of Levi as recompense for their service to Him. 'Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform' (Numbers 18:21).

This support provided the means for ancient Israel to worship God and be taught the divine laws according to His will. Later the New Testament describes a change in administration because the Church – the spiritual temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19-22) – now acts on behalf of Jesus Christ, our High Priest.

The responsibility for teaching God's truth now falls on the New Testament Church.

Did Christ teach tithing?

Did Jesus Christ uphold the biblical practice of tithing? Notice His comments to the scribes and Pharisees: 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and

mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, *without leaving the others undone* (Matthew 23:23; cf. Luke 11:42).

The Pharisees were careful to accurately tithe even the smallest of spices, yet they often neglected the weightier principles of the law. Jesus told them they should have done *both*. Neither tithing nor such weightier matters as 'justice and mercy and faith' should be neglected in our Christian lives today.

Christ and His apostles taught that a giving attitude should be a major part of practicing God's way of life. 'Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you' (Luke 6:38).

We can rest assured that our Creator will supply the needs of all who sincerely seek first His Kingdom and become willing and enthusiastic partners with Him in the work of preaching and publishing the gospel.

Co-workers with Christ

Christ has commissioned His Church to carry on the spiritual

work He started nearly 2,000 years ago. Tithing has been the principal source of funding that effort. As Christians, we are called to be co-workers with God and Christ.

'We are God's fellow workers' (1 Corinthians 3:9). And: 'Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, *that we may become fellow workers for the truth*' (3 John 5-8).

What an awesome gift and responsibility – to be a fellow worker, a co-worker with Christ – in publishing the gospel around the world!

To better understand the scriptural instruction about God's method of financing the outreach of the gospel, please request your free copy of the brochure *What Does the Bible Teach About Tithing?* Other important financial principles are explained in the free companion booklet *Managing Your Finances*, also available upon request.

Christ's Return

(Continued from page 4)

at the appropriate time, Jesus the Christ, the pre-incarnate Word, came to earth to deliver us from our sins (John 1:1-3, 14).

The evidence of Christ's second coming, and indeed the reality of His first coming, are bound together in Scripture. Once God made the promise of sending a Deliverer, a Messiah, a Saviour – it was as good as done. No one can thwart God's plan and purpose or change His mind about the promises that are essential to carrying out His plan of salvation.

Regarding His coming return to earth, Jesus Himself stated categorically: 'I will come again . . .' (John 14:3). Barely two months later, two heavenly messengers confirmed this statement (Acts 1:10).

We have shown from scripture that Christ's first coming was prophesied long before New Testament times. In reality His first coming encompasses *the evidence* for His second coming (see Isaiah 61:1-2; Hebrews 9:24-27).

Abraham looked with faith and complete confidence into the future and foresaw the day of Christ's first coming (John 8:56). It will be only a matter of time before all the prophecies are fulfilled and God sends His Son to earth again. In Hebrews 11:13 we read of those faithful servants of God who viewed these promises with spiritual eyes and saw their fulfilment 'afar off'.

The importance of Christ's second coming is plainly highlighted in both the Old and New Testaments. It is promised in Holy Scripture and its fulfilment is assured. Are you preparing yourself for that certain event?

Gerhard Marx

The Feast Jesus Kept

The September/October issue of *The Good News* magazine offers essential information for those who are committed to keeping God's festivals, including the Feast of Tabernacles.

In the UK, this year's meetings will be held for eight consecutive days from 29th September to 7th October in the Guildhall at Winchester, not far from Southampton. Registration is free at the door.

Those attending should make their own arrangements to stay in temporary accommodation, as pictured by the temporary booths in the days of the nation of Israel.

Further details may be found on www.ucg.org.uk/festival/feast_2004.htm. Or telephone us at 020 8386 8467 before 27 September.

Questions & Answers

Q: Where do you stand on the European Union (EU)?
D G, Bradford, W Yorkshire

A: On the 18th June 2004, in a late night session, the 25 nations that make up the current European Union agreed to their first constitution, although each country must ratify it. The pro and con arguments are profuse, but in essence the proposed document may not actually create the federal superstate for which some had hoped. Public apathy and the rising numbers of Euro-sceptics, even among nations newly joined, put a stop to that for the present time. Referenda on the constitution to be held in eight or more of the member states could yet see this new constitution sidetracked.

With approximately 50 percent of any member state's new legislation now coming from the European Parliament, the EU has been responsible for bringing in many beneficial laws for its 450 million citizens, especially in the areas of employment, health and safety and human rights.

There have, however, also been numerous laws that have served only to irritate and annoy – among these are compulsory metrification, particularly in weights and measures, standardisation of food

labelling and content, and laws affecting herbal medicines.

There have also been some real blunders such as the Directive on Waste Management, which was brought in long before the facilities were in place to actually comply with it. Arguments continue over the cost of running the EU and the many reports of waste and mismanagement.

Bible prophecy speaking of 'the time of the end' makes reference to 10 'kings' giving their power to an entity called 'the beast' (Revelation 17:12-14). The European Union may play a part in making up this group of ten, but clearly not in its current form consisting of 25 nations. Perhaps the EU's core countries will constitute the nucleus of this coming power prophesied in the Bible.

Among the nations of north-western Europe are several believed to be descended from ancient Israel. They were taken into captivity by the ancient Assyrians over 100 years before the neighbouring nation of Judah suffered the same fate at the hands of the Babylonians. Much of the nation of Judah, that is, the Jews, later returned to the Holy Land; but the House of Israel (now known as the lost 10 tribes) did not.

Prophecy indicates that 'at the time of the end', just before Christ's return, the Israelite nations will suffer at the hands of a revived 'Babylonian-type' superpower (Daniel 12:1).

There was a comment in *The Daily Telegraph* lead article of 19 June 2004 attributed to French President Jacques Chirac: 'Britain won't be able to stop core groups of countries pressing ahead with integration of their own.'

Clearly there is still division in the EU between those who want a federal superstate and those who do not. It may be that the beast power will form from the nations desiring much closer integration. It would seem unlikely that Britain, and perhaps a few other nations also believed to be descended from the tribes of ancient Israel, would be among them.

While we should watch prophetic events in Europe with interest and conviction, we should never neglect our relationship with God and our efforts, with His help, to pattern our lives on His Son Jesus Christ. The two go together (see Luke 21:34-36). To study further into these prophetic subjects, please request our free brochures *The Book of Revelation Unveiled* and *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.

How our literature is funded

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Letters from Our Readers

'Britain's Declining Respect for Biblical Values'

The recent article 'Britain's Declining Respect for Biblical Values' (July/August Supplement) expresses exactly what has been happening in the UK for the last 40 years. It attributes this to the lax laws and inadequate discipline as well as the decline in religious beliefs. Through your articles you help to stimulate discussion about these things and hopefully start to reverse the situation.

Mrs S H B, Bury, Lancashire

The Good News

I have just received the latest *Good News* (July/August) and I can only say that I am amazed how you can keep up the high standard of the magazine month after month. The current issue, however, excelled all others. The subject was the Bible. I was enthralled from beginning to end.

Mr C B, Darwen, Lancashire

Thank you for continuing to send the magazines and the booklets. I look forward to receiving them and building on the knowledge they bring.

M B, Duns, Scotland

Bible Study Course

Thank you very much for this excellent Bible course. It has increased my knowledge of God's Word a great deal.

R A, Sweden

Fulfilling basic needs

Reading your publications has opened up my mind to Christianity.

P A, Swansea, South Wales

I'm not particularly religious, but I find *The Good News* really interesting, answering nagging doubts on many subjects.

A B, Newton Abbot, Devon

I value each article with more appreciation for our reason for being.

C L R, France

Determining our beliefs

I am not sure whether or not you believe in a Trinity. I don't think you believe in a personal devil, do you? I don't believe in either.

Mrs A B, Stockport

- *Our biblical reasons for disbelieving the Trinity are carefully outlined in the free booklet Who Is God? The scriptural reasons why we do believe in a personal Satan are thoroughly covered in our free booklet Is There Really a Devil?*

I enjoy reading your *Good News* magazine. It helps me to understand the Bible and also with Bible study. Are you Sabbath keepers?

J P, London

- *The United Church of God observes the seventh-day Sabbath as one of its fundamental beliefs. The biblical reasons are made plain in our free booklet Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest. All our publications are available without charge upon request.*

Reader from Romania

The Good News is a very precious publication, having well-documented information about the world we are living in. It also has good advice, biblically documented,

on the spiritual life we should follow. There is no proselytizing, just simple facts presented on the realities we have to face.

T I M, Romania

Reader from Israel

Thank you for re-enlisting me in your roster of subscribers. I feel I'm on the right track once again. We all need to be fed and satisfied with God's nourishment. Keep up the noble work of trumpeting God's truth to a world held captive.

V V E, Israel

Emphasising the intellect

Thank you, very good. But you seem to emphasise intellectual aspects at the expense of spiritual, devotional fundamentals of godliness.

L F, Ramsey, Isle of Man

- *Our biblical brief includes a strong message warning the world about its way of life and where that misguided way is rapidly taking humanity (Matthew 24:14; Isaiah 58:1). But we also strive to present equally effective material on becoming true Christians and then growing in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). A good number of our booklets such as You Can Have Living Faith reflect the latter purpose.*

New donors

I have pleasure in enclosing a small donation towards the costs of *The Good News*.

V F K, Greenford, Middlesex

Please find enclosed a small gift to help you with your work. Your magazine is certainly one of truth and understanding.

G W, Merthyr Tydfil, Wales