

Olympic Losses By Split Seconds

The whole world has watched the Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan. We have felt the joy of victory and the pain of defeat with those who participated.

The difference in the winner and loser was infinitesimal in many instances. How frustrating and devastating it must have been for the losers. Since childhood they had had this dream of winning which caused them to dedicate their lives to obtaining a gold medal. They practiced hours daily for years. They trained physically and mentally with a sort of obsession for winning.

Then, it was by a few hundredths of a second that that they were beaten! Their defeat had to be detected by electronic equipment because the eye or a stop-watch could not detect the difference in the competitors. Or it was the flexing of a knee or an arm that the judges saw and ruled against. Or an embarrassing fall. What a fine line between the winner and the loser!

Several years ago a man in his eighties (that seemed old to me then!) shook my hand in the vestibule as he was leaving the assembly for home. He had been a disciple many years and had served as an elder. I had not preached that day, and I do not know what prompted his remark. But he droned sadly as he shook my hand, "It sure is haarrd to be a Christian, ain't it Brother Hook?" In that crowded moment, I did not ask why he felt that way and he did not take time to explain his feelings.

Knowing some of that brother's concept of the basis of our salvation, however, I think he might have had thoughts like these. Maybe in the judgment, God will see that I did not forgive someone as completely as I thought I had, or that I did not give enough. Maybe it is a sin after all to drink from an individual glass instead of a shared goblet in the communion. Could it be that I was in a congregation that had an unqualified elder? I thought the Lord wanted me to help my country by serving in the military, but perhaps that was on his list of prohibitions. Did I fail to help some hungry person when I saw his need? Maybe I did not understand some command properly or missed some inference. On and on, the list of questions of doubt could go. Any one of these fine, hardly perceptible, debatable distinctions could keep me from winning eternal life!

Do you hold any of those doubts and feelings of insecurity? Do you feel that indeed it is hard to be a Christian? There is a world of difference in the comparisons that I have made above. If you can make that distinction, it can change your entire perspective.

The Olympic athlete must win by means of his or her own strength, dedication, skill, and perfection of performance, but you and I will win because of Jesus' perfect power and performance! Jesus has won for us! We need only to live in a relationship with him.

Read again this great assurance: *"This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the*

light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 John 1:5-10). To walk in the light does not mean to live in sinless perfection, else we would need no forgiveness. It means to continue in him who has brought us to God. It is not a matter of being able to discern and do everything perfectly but of reliance on him who accepts us as we stumble along as though we were perfect.

Is it all that hard to live a sincere, honest, and ethical life? Do addictions to alcohol and drugs offer too much joy? Is holding grudges too enjoyable to give up? Is it painful to worship God and to depend upon him? Is it just too hard to live in loving faithfulness to your spouse? And when we stumble because of weakness in one of these or countless other matters, is it simply too trying to confess self-will, pride, or ignorance and to ask for forgiveness? Does finding the joy that comes from living in favor with God lead to an unbearably dreary and miserable life?

We are not trying to hide the reality of the warnings about falling into damning sins. There is constant temptation, a warring between the flesh and the spirit. But every person who wants to be can be a winner.

The same Paul who wrote, *“Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall,”* also promised, *“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide a way of escape, that you may be able to endure it”*(1 Cor. 10:12f).

Paul pictured himself as a contestant in running and boxing. *“Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable . Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified”* (1 Cor. 9:24-27). But he was not thinking of being saved by a split-hair perception or achievement. He could revel in the anticipated victory, shouting, *“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Rom. 8:37-39).

There is an abundance of similar assurances in the Scriptures which should lift any perceived burden from our lives. Jesus’ great invitation is still extant: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matt. 11:28-30). If the yoke of law that your spiritual advisors lay on you seems exacting, hard, and burdensome, consider Jesus’ own words again. And add John’s assurance, *“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome”* (1 John 5:3f). If you think he has made it hard for you, look again at the Scriptures for the grace they offer instead of a system of detailed law.

The Olympic gold medal is earned and temporal. The garland, or wreath, that we receive is the gift of life, unearned, undeserved, and unfading. []