

**August 3, 2008**

**Title: Olympians Remember the Witnesses**

**Text: Hebrews 12:1**

**The Big Idea: Spiritual Olympians, with a “go for the goal” mindset, remember the witnesses.**

**Series: Spiritual Champions: Going for the Goal is based on Hebrews 12:1-13 and designed to coincide with the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, August 8 – 24 and beyond.**

### **Introduction**

**The world is watching China and China knows it. An essay I read in a national news magazine this week titled: A Viewer’s Guide to Beijing states, “From its inception, Beijing 2008 was ballyhooed as a nation’s coming-out party, one that would presage the Chinese Century. But you don’t get your very own century without first establishing supremacy in international sports...” (Mark Starr, A Viewer’s Guide to Beijing, Newsweek, August 4, 2008, P. 42)**

**Four years ago China finished second in gold medals... ahead of Russia and just four behind the USA. China has set the stage to surge past the United States this year.**

**Interestingly, China is largely motivated by what the Chinese refer to as their “National Humiliation.” “In 2001 the People’s Congress proclaimed a ‘National Humiliation Day.’” Its origin reaches back to the signing of the Treaty of Versailles following WWI in which Japan was awarded Germany’s concessions in China. After that, “Never forget our national humiliation,” became a common slogan. They have viewed their legacy as that of a country that has been humiliated repeatedly at the hands of foreigners and of failed attempts to redefine themselves. Subsequently, China has “allowed itself to imagine that its national identity might metamorphose from victim to victor, thanks to the Olympic Games. In one grand symbolic stroke, a successful Games was meant to cleanse China’s messy historical slate, overthrow its legacy of victimization and allow the country to spring forth on the world stage reborn.” (Orville Schell, China’s Agony of Defeat, Newsweek, August 4, 2008, PP. 39-41)**

**The Chinese are working feverishly to suppress charges of human rights violations, censorship, corruption, pollution, and labor abuses... as if Tibet, Taiwan and Hong Kong were not enough. The Chinese know the humiliation of losing status on the international scene. We can relate to the desire for national pride and honor and the embarrassment of dishonor.**

**The Olympics are a stage for national honor... and the Olympics are a stage for individual honor. The world watches, sponsoring nations watch, fellow athletes watch... all eyes are on the competitors. The Olympic Games are a matter of International honor, national honor, team honor, and individual for each athlete.**

**In the next six weeks, I would like for us to think of ourselves as spiritual athletes... spiritual Olympians if you will. We will be neither, in Beijing nor vying for medals in competitive sports. However, we will all be vying for the prize that will come at the end of our race.**

**The Apostle Paul put it like this: I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now, the prize awaits me – the crown of righteousness that the Lord will give to me when he returns. And the prize is not just for me, but for all who eagerly look forward to his return. II Timothy 4:6-8**

**The Christian life is likened to an athletic event in the sense that we are:**

- **Aiming at the ultimate goal of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, receiving commendation from God, and the hope of heaven.**

**And in the meantime, we are:**

- **Anticipating that getting there will be something akin to a marathon.**

**We understand that athletics events, when taken seriously, are not a stroll in the park on a sunny spring afternoon. The writer of Hebrews 12 compares becoming a spiritual Olympian to being an Olympian athlete. In fact, one commentator describes Hebrews 12 as “the perfect summary of the Christian life.” (Wm. Barclay, Daily Study Bible Series, The Letter to the Hebrews, P. 171)**

**So we begin the series by examining the mindset of the athletic Olympian as a transferable concept that may be applied as the mindset of a spiritual Olympian.**

**The first thing an Olympians needs to keep in mind is this:**

**I. Spiritual Olympians are being watched by a huge number of people.**

**Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith... Hebrews 12:1a NLT**

**Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses... Hebrews 12:1a KJV**

**A. The first implication is that we are being watched.**

**Witnesses see. Witnesses watch. The Wiki Answer people estimate that over 3 billion people will watch the 2008 Summer Olympics on their televisions this year. 3 billion viewers is a lot of watchers.**

**The writer says that Christians who are living out their faith as followers of Jesus Christ are being watched..**

**We typically associate being watch as being bad thing. When a parent warns a child, “I’ve got my eye on you...”, it means the child had better behave. But that is not always the case and that is not the case in this context. In an athletic event an athlete needs to know and even depends on the presence and encouragement of the spectators.**

**B. The second inference is that we are being watched by a large number of spectators. The witnesses are described as a “huge crowd” or a “great cloud.”**

**The word used in our text for cloud is the Greek word nephos. Nephos refers to a mass of clouds banking up all around in the sky. The implication is that the spectators who watch us in our daily living out of the faith, literally fill the sky. The other word for cloud is nephele, which means a single cloud. (Leon Morris, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Hebrews, P. 133)**

**A few weeks ago I was sitting on my west patio reading when my neighbor came running out of his house (oblivious to my presence) with his camera trained on the sky. I thought he must have just received a rare bird bulletin from the Denver Field Ornithologists and Rare Bird Observatory to report the sighting of and photograph the Fulvous Whistling Duck... I later learned he had spied an unusually formed cloud from his window and wanted a photo.**

**The image the writer wants us to have is not that of a single cloud but of a massive bank of clouds - in number, density, and power... an overtly impressive number of spectators gathered to watch us.**

**There is a second thing Spiritual Olympians need to remember.**

**II. Spiritual Olympians need to remember the crowd is cheering for them.**

**We are surrounded by a great crowd or cloud of witnesses...**

**On the front cover of Time Magazine last week was photo of Dara Torres... Dara is a nine time Olympic medalist in swimming. She is 41 years old, the mother of a 2-year old, and she has qualified for her fifth Olympic Games.**

**She qualified by swimming the 100-meter freestyle 2.47 seconds faster than she did in her Olympic effort in 1988 when she was 21-years old. Dara Torres, along with 99 other Olympic athletes were cited in a major feature article as 100 Olympic Athletes to Watch in the 2008 Games. (Alice Park, Faster than Ever, Time, August 4, 2008, P. 47**

**In his book 1984 George Orwell coined a phrase that has become a watchword in our own country and elsewhere: “Big brother is watching you.”**

**I read this week that within 200 yards of where George Orwell lived, there are 32 cameras trained on his residence 24 hours a day. Britain is estimated to have 4.2 million cameras... one for every 14 people in the country. Every citizen is caught on camera an average of 300 times a day. (George Orwell, Big Brother is Watching Your House, News and Current Affairs, thisislondon.co.uk, August 1, 2008)**

**Being under the scrutiny does not feel good. When we are being scrutinized, the intent is to catch us or correct us or criticize us. The crowd of witnesses in our text do none of those things... these people are cheering for us.**

**Bonnie and I have spent hours and hours and hours sitting in the bleachers at volleyball and basketball games. We have spent hours in the stands at football games. We have spent hours and hours at track and field events.**

**I suspect loneliness is one of the most dreaded feelings in life. When a person feels he is all alone in his struggle... It is a lonely place when there is the sense that no one sees, no one hears, no one cares, no one shares, or knows of my doubts and fears.**

**Our children always knew where Bonnie and I were... if we had not gotten their attention, they would always look over the crowd until they spotted us. It was important to them that we be there to cheer them on. My sense was that they were playing not only for themselves, their team, and their school, but for Mom and Dad as well. Our presence and support inspired them to do their best.**

**The yet unanswered question is, who are these people who have gathered in mass to witness our pursuit of Christlikeness and the hope of eternal life? Who are these watchers?**

**A. Are they the people in our lives today? Are they our mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles, grandparents, our children, cousins, teachers, pastors, mentors, friends and neighbors, coaches, employers, and colleagues? Are we to assume or hope, that everyone in our lives constitutes a great crowd or cloud of witnesses who are cheering**

us on? Are they literally the people who observe our lives day in and day out?

Are those who watch us and cheer us on like the 3 billion people who will be crowding the event centers in and around Beijing and tuning in on their televisions to watch the Olympians?

Or do we think of them in another way?

B. Are they the people who have experienced the faith before us? Are they the dead in Christ... the deceased saints of the Christian faith?

Most commentators agree that the context in which we find Hebrews 12 is a continuation of what was being expressed in Hebrews 11. Hebrews 11 is known as “the faith chapter.” Hebrews 11 speaks glowingly of those who persevered in the walk of faith in life, but whose lives are now largely a matter of historical record? Is the memory of their spiritual journeys what inspires us?

After citing quite a list of Old Testament saints who persevered in their spiritual marathons, the writer speaks of all those who remained true to their faith, even unto death in anonymity. At the conclusion of Hebrews 11 it says, These people who have been mentioned received God’s approval because of their [life of] faith, yet none of them received all that was promised... for they can’t receive the prize at the end of the race until we finish the race. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a crowd or cloud of witnesses... Hebrews 11:19-12:1

The inference is clearly that it is those who have run their own races and knowledge of the historical record of their faith, that serves as a reminder that we are not the first to struggle with problems, persecution, discouragement, and even failure? Is it the collective memory of their example that serves to motivate us to do as they did, run our races, and cross our finish lines? (Life Application Bible Commentary, Hebrews, P. 204)

Are those described as witnesses more like examples we look to for inspiration? When Team USA’s 22-year old, 6’7” heavyweight hopeful steps into the ring in Beijing, is it likely that he will have been reminded that Cassius Clay stepped into the ring in Rome in 1960 and emerged with the gold? Is it the memory of those who have gone before us that encourages us today?

I don’t know... but I want to think that just as Christ is the unseen guest in our midst, there are others who are unseen and who care deeply about who we are and where we are and who are cheering us on in the faith.

I have no evidence and I may indeed be treading at the edge of heresy, but who among us has not wondered if, and wished that a deceased loved one was looking down on us and loving us?

Transition: Or are they...

C. Are they the unseen celestial watchers who have lived before us and who live still? Are those who watch, though unseen, are with the Lord - alive and well and watching?

One commentator was almost adamant in his understanding of the text. He said of this crowd of witnesses that they are the athletes who have completed their events and are now eager to encourage the new contestants. He said, "They are alive, aware, and present. There is no mere sense of historical memory expressed here. It is a picture of an active, watching through shouting encouragement to those now struggling in their own events." (Louis H. Evans Jr., The Communicator's Commentary, Hebrews, PP. 214-215)

So how do we respond to what we have been thinking about this morning? We return to the Big Idea...

Spiritual Olympians, with a "go for the goal" mindset, remember the witnesses.

1. The living in your life who watch.
2. The memory of the examples of spiritual champions from the past.
3. The unseen who are with the Lord: alive, well, and watching.

And how does a Spiritual Olympian do those things?

1. Spiritual Olympians look around... and see and name those in their lives who encourage them in living their faith.
2. Spiritual Olympians look back... and are inspired by the lives of Spiritual Champions from the past.
3. Spiritual Olympians look up... and celebrate the fact that those who have completed their races are now cheering us on as we make our way to the goal.

Conclusion:

After Verdi had conducted his worst opera ever in Florence, Italy, he was pleased when the crowd rose and gave him a standing ovation for his performance... some even tossed flowers in his direction. It is said that he smiled and bowed before the crowd, until he saw the master, Rossini, sitting in the wings and looking at him as if to say, "Oh Verdi, Verdi!"

**May we find encouragement and inspiration in living out our own races by remembering that the Masters, the Spiritual Champions of the faith, are watching.**