

### **Paul's Letters: Athletic Metaphors for Sport Today**

If his writings were any indication, the Apostle Paul was a sports fan – and would have been one today. Paul's letters frequently referenced athletic competition as metaphors for his missionary work. Acts, Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Thessalonians and Timothy reference athletic allusions (“foot race,” “crown” “boxing,” “wrestling”) on numerous occasions. Paul employed athletic metaphors to illustrate Christian responsibility in light of the Isthmian and Olympic Games held in Corinth during Paul's life, and these images of competition parallel Paul's own version of the Corinth sports-crazed culture with America's modern culture and language of sport. Recent scholarly literature suggests that sport is a form of religion, and the Apostle Paul's letters, it would seem, supports this claim.

The athletic imagery in Paul was set around athletic contests in and around Corinth. In addition to the Olympic games, the Isthmian games were developed, as well as the Pythian, Nemean, Panathenanean and other festivals sporting festivals specifically designed for local crowds to afford first-rate athletics close to home.<sup>1</sup> The Isthmian games were celebrated and played every two years, while the Olympic games were played every four.<sup>2</sup> Athletes ran in foot races, boxed, wrestled, among other events, but the influence of these events are what stood out to Paul. Athletics were a spectacle, and

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<sup>1</sup> Historical background... p. 344

<sup>2</sup> Oscar Bronneer, “Corinth: Center of Paul's Missionary Work in Greece,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 14 (1951): 95.

the people of Corinth understood this culture of combat.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, it is no surprise that Paul used such metaphors in his writings. Paul's followers – those likely to be in the crowd cheering – were likely to understand his teachings.

Paul's most prominent athletic metaphor –the “foot race” – occurs in several places (1 Cor. 9:24-27; Gal. 2:2; Phil. 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:7). In 1 Corinthians, Paul utilized sports language to encourage the Corinthians to lead a responsible Christian life. He mentions “race,” “runners,” “competitor,” “self-discipline” and “crown.” Winning was the focus, and because there was only one prize (“but only one receives the prize”), Paul urged his audience to run to claim it, and keep “running” until the prize was won.<sup>4</sup>

24. Don't you know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to get it.

However, what if Paul comes up short? What if he expends his physical and emotional energy – runs the race, tries his best – but he fails? He realizes this possibility in Phil. 2:16.

16. holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labour in vain.

Paul shares his personal wish for the Philippians to heed his teachings, so that Paul will not have run the race of life in vain.<sup>5</sup> Paul had doubts about the Philippians, and their ability to follow through with his teachings and duty to make sacrifices for God. As a result, Paul “runs,” only to fall, in his mind, short.

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<sup>3</sup> Contending for faith in Paul's absence. Pg. 94

<sup>4</sup> Sacra Pagina, bible commentary (1 Corinthians)

<sup>5</sup> Philippians bible commentary p. 107

1 Corinthians is also the only instance in which Paul used the image of the boxer (1 Cor. 9:26-27). Paul was an actual boxer, suggested by the phrase “I box in the same way

26. So I run accordingly, without hesitation. I box in the same way, not as someone flailing at the air. 27. but I bruise my body and I subjugate it lest, having preached to others, I myself fail to qualify.