

Olympic Goodbyes

Dan Nelson - pastor

Calvary Chapel of the Ojai Valley

With all of the Olympic fervor over the last few weeks, it seems sort of sad to say goodbye. Video feeds have been streaming live via satellite 24/7 and many busy people have halted life to tune in to our long-held tradition of international competition, super athletics, and national pride. Water cooler talk had transformed around the world from politics and movies to battles for gold medals and unexpected victories. Some countries that most people had never even heard of before this summer became par for the course of conversation. And it is fascinating how many spiritual lessons we can learn from Olympic sports.

It seems that we all have our favorite sports that we like to follow. In our house, gymnastics holds high place in our list since my 12-year-old daughter, Aubrielle, is a gymnast. Because my son, Andrew, started competitive swimming last year and recently joined the water polo team, these also have risen in our "must see" rankings. Of course, we've been a soccer family forever, so I don't want to miss that either. But in fact, we were traveling through part of the Olympic season and really missed a lot of it.

Olympic excitement has a rich history of wonder and peace building, but there also are some darker moments to tell. Because the roots of this international competition go so far back and the ministry of Jesus was divinely placed in the context of the Roman Empire where this inherited Greek tradition was both honored and expanded, it should be no wonder that sports metaphors are found throughout the New Testament to convey spiritual truths.

The Apostle Paul speaks of the tremendous effort, discipline and training that goes into preparing to compete. Most athletes dedicate their entire lives for years, at enormous personal expense and whole family sacrifice, to get to that point. Very few become Olympic contenders, even less win medals. In the end, it's about the achievement and glory not the gold since the cost of the precious metal was paid for many times over in expenses to train. But the glory quickly fades. I was on CNN this morning trying to find Olympic recaps but it wasn't easy. They have moved on already. I know it may sound shocking to say that our Olympic athletes have already become "yesterday's news," but it's true. This is what Paul means when he states that all of this effort was for a perishable prize. How many of our winners can you remember from four years ago? Eight? Most of us know a few, but that probably has more to do with celebrity endorsements of sportswear and cereal boxes than their actual achievement. All of this effort for a glory that fades so fast. Yes, the Scriptures encourage us to invest our energies toward a prize that lasts.

The tragic shot of the mom watching from the stands in Beijing as her daughter was injured during gymnastics warm-ups was heartbreaking. One look on her face told a story they could write a book about. Years and years, untold effort and persistence, gone in a moment with a twist of an

ankle. I sure hope she actually enjoys the sport and was living life along the way and that this wasn't the most important thing to her. I hope there are higher priorities in her life than merely pursuing sports dreams. This is where worldly ideologies get exposed and the shallowness of a life without the awareness of God.

My good friend Byron and his wife, Annette, tell the story personally. She is a former Olympian, he almost was. As a sports couple, they genuinely are world-class athletes. Their physical fitness and athletic capabilities impress a lot of people. They hang out in the professional sports world. They see it all, good and bad. That is why they have dedicated their lives to something higher; like helping people have real purpose in life through the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures say that there is some profit to physical fitness and "working out" but there is a lot more benefit in investing in the things of the spirit. Jesus told us where to put our first priorities. Today, "Pastor Byron" takes his experiences and coaches people to really win at life, with eternal rewards. But coaches cannot lead an unwilling athlete. Are you willing to train in something really worthwhile? Maybe it's time to pick up your Bible and start working out!

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Dan Nelson is a frequent contributor to the Ojai Valley News and currently serves the Ojai Valley Ministerial Association and community as editor of the Religion Column. Permission is freely granted to reprint the article in its entirety. Dan Nelson is pastor of Calvary Chapel Christian Church of the Ojai Valley.



P.O. Box 1443
Ojai, CA 93024
(805) 640-9498
www.calvaryojai.org

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195 Mahoney Ave., Oak View

Mid-Week Study:

7:00pm Thursday
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