



Minutes With Messiah

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Difficult Questions

There is an account in Luke 20:1-8 about a confrontation between the Sadducees and Jesus. They demanded to know by what authority he did the things he did. He answered them with a tough question. It was tough because the right answer was an answer they were unwilling to give. "And he answered and said unto them, I will also ask you one thing; and answer me: The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or of men?" They didn't want to give the right answer because they did not follow John. They wouldn't give the answer they wanted to give because it would have been unpopular with the people. Therefore they gave no answer, and Jesus did not answer their question.

I recently read an article about Jericho that brought up a similar "difficult" question. It is difficult because the answer some people want to give is clearly not the answer God gives. But if they answer correctly then one could ask, like Jesus would have answered the Sadducees, "Then why didn't you believe?" The question is this: when the walls of Jericho fell before the Israelites, whose doing was it, God's or the Israelites'?

Some might answer that it was the doing of the Israelites. After all, they marched around the walls once a day for six days, then seven times on the seventh, then blew their *shofars* and shouted, and the walls fell down. But consider, if God didn't make the walls fall down might the Israelites not still be marching and blowing today, expecting the walls to crumble? "And the LORD said unto Joshua, See, I have given into thine hand Jericho." (Josh 6:2) Jericho was a free gift of God. It was God's grace that made the walls to fall down.

Based on that, many would then answer that it was God's doing that the walls fell down. And they would be right. But would the walls have fallen if the Israelites had not demonstrated their faith by their obedience? If they had said that God was giving them Jericho so that nothing they could do would result in the walls falling down or not falling down, might they not be sitting outside the intact walls of Jericho even today?

God gave them the city, but expected them to march around the walls in order to receive the gift. Did they "earn" the victory by marching around the walls? In no way! The victory was assured. God had promised it to them, and all they did was accept the promise.

God has another gift for us. It is called salvation. Does it come from God or man? Certainly by the grace of God. Do we need to earn the gift? Certainly not! Then it would no longer be a gift. But have we nothing to do to receive that gift? Some would say so. Some say that obeying God's order to march around Jericho constituted working for the victory. In like manner they say that obeying God by the "works" of faith, repentance, confession, and baptism constitutes man's attempts at earning the grace of God. In both cases, Jericho and salvation, the gift of God was free for the taking. Nobody could earn either gift, because God has it all wrapped up and ready for us to open. Marching around Jericho was not earning the gift; it was opening the gift. Being baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38) is not earning the gift; it is opening the wrapping.

Paul told the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:3-8) that the gospel was the death, burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus the Christ. He told the Romans (Rom 6:3-6) that baptism was a burial with Christ, necessary before a new life. It is, then, not earning salvation, but showing the world the gospel. Peter and Paul both said it was essential before receiving remission of sins. It is the marching around Jericho that brings down the walls of sin.

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Athletes For Christ

During several months of each year my eldest son and I spend a lot of time in preparation for the Special Olympics. He participates in and I coach athletics, also known as track and field. Neither of us is overly fond of practice, but we know we must practice to do well at the important times, the track meets. That is when the prizes are awarded, when the crowds (such as they are) cheer, and when you get bored waiting for your next event.

The Olympic games and their imitators were not unknown to Paul, the apostle. We don't know for sure, but from his writings we can gather that he was an athlete. Perhaps he was a frustrated wannabe. Most Jews, and especially Pharisees like Paul, could not compete because the athletes of that day participated nude, a concept opposed by faithful Jews. (Part of the impetus behind the wars of the Maccabees was that some of the sect that became the Sadducees were willing to run in the games.) But Paul was familiar with, and apparently enjoyed, the games. That is even one reason some scholars give for believing Paul wrote the book of Hebrews.

In his letters Paul sometimes taught lessons from athletic competition. He addressed the training, the prizes, the crowds, and even the boredom between races.

Training for Our Competition

The real work of any athlete comes not in the competition but the preparation for it. The race is merely

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the culmination of frequent practice. Without the work of practice one could not run as well in the race.

Paul knew this. He told the Corinthians (1 Cor 9:25-26) "And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly." I have seen beginning athletes run uncertainly. They don't know when to start. They don't know to stay in their own lanes, or in a longer race just when they can change lanes to their advantage. They slow down as they approach the finish

line. Only after frequent practice do they start at the gun, stay in their lane, not look at the other runners, and run through the finish line.

Paul could say that he did not run uncertainly because of his experience. Not just the experiences he recounted in 2 Corinthians 11. Mostly he could run "not uncertainly" because of his familiarity with the coach and the rules for training the coach had communicated to him, and to us. He could so run because he practiced temperance in all things. He did not start his training as if he was an experienced runner, but grew in skill.

We have the same guidelines for our spiritual training as Paul. In fact, most of the guidelines we have were transcribed by Paul for our benefit. A few were written down by others, such as James, John, and Peter. But the guidelines are worthless if we never look at them. Imagine an athlete hiring a coach, and then ignoring everything he tried to teach. He gains nothing, and loses the race. So it is if we don't study our Bibles.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Tim 3:16-17)

If we don't open the book, it can not be profitable for these things. If we don't study the book, we have lost the race long before it has begun.

The Competition

The day of the competition has arrived. The practices are over; the opening ceremonies have come at last. The crowds are gathering. It is time to leave off the workout clothes. It may also be time to deal with the long waits between the races. All these things are addressed by Paul.

Athletes are performers. Yes, runners will all tell you that their real competition is the clock; they want to better themselves. Deep down, though, they all know that having a crowd of spectators encourages one to do better than if he is running for nobody but himself. I once knew a Special Olympian who ran the mile. I watched him set his personal best time one year. After he finished the race he came up to me and told me that he was ready to quit running as he approached the last turn. But he saw me cheering him on as he rounded the turn and (he said) that spurred him on to finish the race. He thanked me for encouraging him to set his best time.

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us

lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:1-2)

We have a crowd watching us, cheering us on in our spiritual race. They know what the training and the race require. They have been there. And they are on our side! Listen to them cheer us on! Wouldn't it be a shame to disappoint them? How can we stop running with all of them looking on? Yet many ignore the crowd, and lose the energy that the crowd could be giving them. The writer tells us that we run because of the crowd of witnesses. Let us show them what we can do.

He also says it is time to set aside the hindrances; to take off the sweats and run in the shorts. Imagine if you will the Olympic Games of ancient Greece. It is time to run the hundred meter race, or whatever their equivalent was. Look at the starting line. Five of the six racers are naked. They have nothing to hinder them in their run. The guy in lane three, though, is wearing a toga. Not just a midi-length tunic; a full toga. The starter gives them the "go" and five of the six are well on their way to the finish line. But what of toga boy? He got as far as two steps before tripping over the hem of his garment. Half the crowd is not even looking at the finish because they are laughing him to shame. The writer of Hebrews could tell him to lay aside the hindrances.

Mary Decker was one of the finest distance runners of her time. But the picture people remember from the Olympics is not of her crossing the finish line, but of her lying in pain on the track because Zola Budd had hindered her. She is famous not for her speed or ability, but because she could not finish the race. Paul could say, as he did in Galatians 5:7, "Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?" Nearing the finish line means nothing if you don't cross it.

The writer of the above passage from Hebrews may also address the long waits between heats. He tells us to run with patience. A runner finishes his first heat; then what? Does he spend the two hours till his next run warming up on the infield? Not if he expects to win. Some experienced athletes even lay down (after properly cooling off) and take a nap. Others read or watch the other races. They know the value of patience between races. There is a time to run, and a time to refresh oneself for the next race. In the church, that time between the races could be compared to our assembling together. The same writer said the purpose of our

assembling together was provoking each other "to love and good works" and "exhorting" (Heb 10:24-25). This is our patient refreshing, because we will soon have to run another heat.

Consider also that we are not running by ourselves. Christianity is not the 100 meter run, but the 4 by 100 meter relay. Just because we have run our hundred meters doesn't mean the race is over. We have to hand the baton to someone else. "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Teaching

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them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." (Matt 28:19-20) Part of the race is the handoff to someone else.

The Prize

Paul, or whomever the writer of Hebrews may have been, exhorted his readers to be "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith." He knew that a race without a finish line is worthless. We have a goal. The coach is waiting for us at the finish line. If we are to run the race, we need to look at him. Looking at other racers will slow us down. Keep your eyes on the coach at the finish line. Run to him.

Paul told the Corinthians to "So run, that ye may obtain [the prize]." (1 Cor 9:24). He said that only one could win the prize in a race. With Christianity it is more like the Special Olympics where everyone receives a prize. But just because there is a prize for everyone who finishes the race doesn't give us leave to walk the 400 meter run. Paul said to run as if you were striving for the top prize. God expects our best. Heaven is the prize, and will be awarded to all who rely on the grace of God through the blood of Christ. But how much better it will be when we know we have lived up to God's expectations. We were created for good works (Eph 2:10). God expects that of us. If we don't run our best, might we not be cheating God although he gives us the prize?

We are all "Athletes for Christ." Listen to the coach. Then we can all be winners.

The People By the Lake

And it came to pass, that, as the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he stood by the lake of Gennesaret. (Luke 5:1)

People came to Jesus for many reasons. Some, like the leprous man later in Luke 5, came to him for healing from various diseases. Others, like the crowds in the latter part of John 6, came because Jesus fed them. Some, like the tax collectors in Matthew 17, came to him for money. Others, the ones he loved most, came to him to hear the word of God.

People choose churches for many reasons. Some, like the leprous man, choose a church that offers miraculous healing from various diseases. Others, like the crowds in John 6, choose a church that feeds them, whether it be programs to feed the homeless or simply a church that enjoys a good potluck. There are even a few, like the tax collectors, who choose a church that will give them money or agrees with their political views. Occasionally you may even find the few, the ones Jesus loves most, who choose a church because that is where they can hear the word of God.

Each person, of course, may be more comfortable with one congregation or another for many reasons. The congregation may be the right size for them, be closest to their home, have members they have known for a long time, be the congregation in which they grew up, or any of a number of other reasons. But the principal reason to choose a church, a congregation, or a preacher should be the reason that the people by the lake came to hear Jesus. As soon as an otherwise

desirable congregation stops teaching the word of God, it becomes an undesirable congregation.

For whatever reason many choose a church, a portion of those might as well stay at home. They assemble out of obligation. They don't participate in the worship, except perhaps the Lord's Supper. Ask them as soon as the assembly is over what the sermon was about and they give you a look like a deer caught in the headlights. They are there because they heard that church was a way to get to heaven. They never heard that the church was not the assembly, but a family relationship with Jesus. (On the other hand, some may even treat family the same way.) Compare with them the people at the lake. They didn't seek the back of the crowd. They didn't just sit around letting the action pass them by. They "pressed upon him to hear the word of God." They had purpose; they acted upon it. They were not about to let Jesus get away without teaching them God's word.

There are still people like that. Some may be found in churches. They arrive on time for study. They stay awake, and may even take notes on the sermon. They give willingly of time and money to make the church live. Some may not be currently in churches. They are looking for God's word, eager to press upon anyone who would teach it to them. May those that are in the churches find those that are not. May people continue to press upon Jesus to hear the word of God. Let each of us ask ourselves, "Would I have been one of those at the lake, or would I have been just sitting in Synagogue?"

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