

God's Chariot of Fire: The Life of Missionary Eric Liddell and the Race He Ran

Hebrews 12:1-3

Introduction: He was born to missionary parents in China. He would die in the same country living out that same missionary calling. And yet his faithful service to King Jesus is often eclipsed by his extraordinary gift as runner and his brilliant performance in the 1924 Olympics in Colombes Stadium in Paris where he won the Gold Medal and set the world and Olympic record in the 400 meters.

Eric Liddell's career as a world champion runner was made famous in the 1982 movie "Chariots of Fire," a film that was nominated for seven Academy Awards and won four, including best picture. There he is accurately portrayed as a man fully surrendered to God whose conviction concerning the Lord's Day led him to refuse to run on Sunday during the Olympics. However, there is so much more to this man whose life was all too brief. He would die of an inoperable brain tumor at the age of 43.

The Bible often uses the images of athletics to teach us important truths about the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 9:26 and 2 Corinthians 4:9 God's Word compares the Christian life to boxing. In Ephesians 6:12 it is wrestling. But in 1 Corinthians 9:26; 2 Timothy 4:7 and Hebrews 12:1-3 the analogy is that of a race. Here in the book of Hebrews the comparison clearly is to a long distance race because we are told to run with "endurance." In fact some form of the word endurance is found in each of the first three verses of Hebrews 12. If the Bible were being written today the marathon might have been allowed to. After all it is a 26.2 mile race (42.19 kilometers) and the longest run in the modern Olympics.

So the Christian life can be compared to a long distance race, not a sprint. That means we need both a different training and a different strategy if we are to run well and finish well and hear from our heavenly Father, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:23, *NKJV*).

Hebrews 12:1-3 contains three clear and overarching themes for how we are to run the race. We will see each of these beautifully illustrated in the life of the man Eric Liddell, a man who would write “Jesus’ life is the most beautiful life there has ever been....They [the disciples] failed him at his death, but with the resurrection and Pentecost they awoke to the meaning of the message he had been trying to give them, and went out to conquer the world (*The disciples of the Christian life*, 50-51). Eric Liddell would gladly follow in their footsteps.

I. Find encouragement as you run.

12:1

We are told to be encouraged as we run the race of the Christian life. Why? Because “we also have such a large crowd of witnesses surrounding us.” The imagery is that of the coliseum or stadium. The grandstands are filled to capacity and we are on the track running the race. Some believe the text is teaching that people in heaven are looking down and watching, but I don’t think this is what the passage means. Rather it is encouraging us to look around because we are not running by ourselves. There are no Lone Rangers in this race. Further, the word “Therefore” is “there for” a reason. It points us back to chapter 11 and God’s “Hall of Faith.” Here we find men and women who have already run the race and crossed the finish line. Their lives are recorded to help us so that we “Won’t grow weary and lost heart” (12:3). God gives us heroes of the faith to encourage and inspire us as we run. This is one of the reasons I so love missionary biographies. They always encourage me.

Eric Liddell certainly had heroes like this in his own parents. He was born in Tienstsin (Tianjin), China on January 16, 1902 as the second son of godly and faithful missionary parents,

James and Mary Liddell. They were strongly devoted to evangelical Christianity and answered God's call to go to China through the London Missionary Society (LMS). His parents would, like their son, serve in China during extremely turbulent and dangerous times. They would also serve with grace, distinction and resolve. They would serve during the "Boxer rebellion" when over 200 missionaries would be murdered. James would serve in a rural area where 80 churches were destroyed and hundreds of Chinese Christians killed. And yet Eric's father would say to the LMS, "I would gladly undertake the duties pertaining to a real pioneer situation" (*Pure Gold*, 19). And he did! The champion that Eric Liddell would become he saw first in his own father and mother.

His close friend and biographer D.P. Thomson gave an address in 1946 following Eric's untimely death in China. He raised the question, "What was his secret?" Here was his answer, "It was first all the home from which he came. No one who knew Liddell's father and mother, no one who had been a guest in their home, who had sensed its atmosphere and its outlook, and had become aware of the spirit which permeated it, could be in any doubt about that. Home was the first great formative influence in the making and shaping of Eric Liddell, as it was of so many. It was there that he got both his ideals and his inspirations (*Running the Race*, 207).

Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." This was true in the life of Eric Liddell. He caught the "missionary bug" as a child and it stayed with him all his life.

In 1932 after his first missionary furlough, Eric was interviewed in Canada by journalist R.E. Knowles who asked Eric, "Are you glad you gave your life to missionary work? Don't you miss the limelight, the rush, the frenzy, the cheers, the rich red wine of victory?" Eric's reply was gracious but to the point, "Oh well, of course it's natural for a chap to think over all that

sometimes, but I'm glad I'm in the work I'm engaging in now. A fellow's life counts for more at this than the other. Not a corruptible crown, but an incorruptible, you know." (*Running*, 163).

Perhaps David Guest said it best, “Eric Liddell, rugby international and Olympic gold medalist, universally admired for his high character, happy humor and for his Christianity, brushed fame calmly aside to return as a missionary to China, where he had been born” (*Running*, 163). The encouragement that Eric received as a child from his parents to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matt. 6:33) never left him. Fame and fortune did not motivate him. Surrender and obedience to the will of God did, something he saw so clearly and consistently in the lives of his mom and dad. None of us who are parents should ever underestimate not only our words, but also our example to our children. How often it is that they walk in our footsteps, especially in the areas where we encourage them. The making of a champion for Christ may be in the works!

II. Focus on the essentials as you run.

12:1

Any kind of race requires both training and a strategy. For a long distance race endurance or perseverance is a must. For the devoted follower of King Jesus whose goal is to run well and finish well, verse one provides three critical keys for our success. They are simple but essential. To neglect even one is to ensure a much more difficult race, if not our failure. We must run this race cleanly (“lay aside every weight”), with confidence (“lay aside...the sin that so easily ensnares us”) and consistently (“with endurance”). Each of these essentials is beautifully illustrated in the life of Eric Liddell. Few men ever ran less encumbered, with greater faith, and consistency of life than did “the flying Scotsman.” Eric was always a good student but he was a great athlete. He was also quiet and shy. However, as his fame spread because of his athletic ability both as a rugby player and runner, D.P. Thomson saw an opportunity for the

gospel. He approached Eric with an invitation to speak about his faith in Christ. This was in April 1923. Eric agreed reluctantly but then began second guessing his decision. Providentially on that very day he received a letter from China (he was now living in Scotland in boarding school as was the custom, especially for sons of missionaries during those years) from his sister Jenny. Mailed weeks earlier, she closed the letter with Isaiah 41:10, “fear not for I am with thee, be not dismayed for I am thy God; I will strengthen thee, yea I will help thee; yea I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.” Eric was emboldened by this and pressed on in faith that this was God’s plan. And it was. God would bless his speaking and use this soft spoken and shy man as a proclaimer of the gospel until his race was finished. Crowds would often flock to hear, in part, because of the transparent humility and sincerity of this incredible champion. He laid aside the weight of fear, placed his trust in God alone, and would speak of Christ whenever and wherever he was invited regardless of the crowd or context. Eric would write Thomsom telling him he had become a changed man since he invited him to bear public witness to Christ, and that a new joy had come into his life. Later in his personal journey, he would refer to this turning point in his life and write, “I was brought up in a Christian home where the stories of the Bible were often told and became familiar to me. In school, the stories of the Bible and the teachings of Christ were placed before me. The beauty of the Christian life began to appeal to me. The time came when the appeal of Christ became more personal and I began to realize that it was going to affect my life. In this experience of Christ there was a sense of sin but that was not nearly so great as the sense of being called to do a piece of work for which I was absolutely unqualified.

My whole life had been one of keeping out of public duties but the leading of Christ seemed now to be in the opposite direction, and I shrank from going forward. At this time I

finally decided to put it all on Christ – after all if He called me to do it, then He would have to supply the necessary power. In going forward the power was given me. Since then the consciousness of being an active member of the Kingdom of Heaven has been very real. New experiences of the Grace of God, sense of sin, wonders of the Bible have come from time to time. All these fresh experiences have given me fresh visions of our Lord.” (*Pure Gold*, 71).

1) Run cleanly: We are challenged to “lay aside every weight.” To say it another way we are to take off, remove and put away any excess baggage. Anything that would weight us down and slow us down and keep us from running our best for Jesus is to be discarded. Eric Liddell well understood some of the weights that could hinder us from running well for Jesus.

To avoid these he advised four tests we should regularly ask ourselves: 1) Am I truthful? 2) Am I honest? 3) Am I pure? 4) Am I selfish? And, there would be other weights that he would identify that he knew would hinder us in running the race well and would especially be harmful to the missionary calling. Note just a sampling he would address:

A) Prejudices – “I believe it is God’s will that the whole world should be without any barriers of race, colour, class, or anything else that breaks the spirit of fellowship” (*DCL*, 38).

B) Distraction – “*Every Christian should live a God-guided life*. If you are not guided by God, you will be guided by someone or something else.” (27).

C) Rebellion – “Surrender means the end of the great rebellion of our wills.” (32).

D) Disobedience – “Sin is anything we know we should do but won’t or don’t do. It is therefore disobedience.” (65).

E) Persecution – “The only way to face persecution is to rejoice. Any other way of facing it fails to come out victorious. The apostles rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (*Acts 5:41*). (71).

F) Lordship – “To speak of Jesus as Lord means that I give him the control of my will....I say ‘Lord Jesus,’ meaning Jesus is now Lord of my life to lead and dictate. My greatest joy is just to do what pleases him” (73).

G) Unexpected hardships – “Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God’s plans, but God *is not helpless among the ruins*” (122).

2) Run with confidence – We are also challenged to lay aside “the sin” which so easily ensnares or entangles us. I call this “the octopus of the Christian life” and I believe it is the same sin for everyone: the sin of unbelief. I think this is the correct interpretation because Hebrews 11 precedes Hebrews 12 and it is all about faith. In fact verse six warns us that “without faith it is impossible to please God...” And, the definite article “the” before the word “sin” in our text I believe specifies a particular sin. Unbelief is often a seductive sin, especially for a Christian. It is what I call the “I need Jesus plus” trap. Once we add anything to Jesus for our salvation or our sanctification we have run into the world of unbelief. We must seek a radical faith and dependence in God that can say like Job, “Even if He [God] kills me, I will hope in Him” (Job 13:15).

Eric Liddell grasped this truth well. He spoke of “two ways of living.” One was the life lived by the law that cannot change us. The other was a life lived by faith “where righteousness comes by grace on God’s side, and by trust and confidence in Christ on our side.” (103). Such faith would lead to what Eric referred to as “victorious living”, a favorite theme of his. Such victory, he said quite simply, “*comes by a practical confidence in God and acting on the promises he has given us.*” And the keys?

- “Keep your eyes off yourself and on your Savior.”
- “Keep your eyes off yourself and on God’s strength.”

- “Fear comes by looking at oneself or others instead on looking at Jesus.”
- “To believe means to act on what in your heart you know is right. Faith acts – victory follows” (116-117). The bottom line: “Trust absolutely: remember, God asks faithfulness – victory follows.”

3) Run consistently – Thirdly, we are called to “run with endurance the race that lies before us.”

Shooting-star Christians who burn bright for a night and then vanish into the midnight darkness bring little glory to God and do not serve well the body of Christ. I believe our Lord is teaching us in this verse it is not “how high you jump” that is important, but how long you keep running.

Eric Liddell would teach that the key to perseverance or endurance was found in one of his favorite components of the Christian life: radical surrender. It would be the last word he would ever speak. It would be a commitment he would honor throughout his life of sacrificial service to Christ.

“God’s will is only revealed to us step by step. He reveals more as we obey what we know. Surrender means that we are prepared to follow his will step by step as it is revealed to us, no matter what” (*DCL*, 77).

He would later add, “God does not say that because you believe in him, he will keep you from hardship and suffering. He says, if you trust him, he will strengthen you to meet all the experiences of life in a conquering spirit. You will have secret resources of power to call on when they are needed.” (121).

III. Follow the example as you run.

12:2-3

Eric Liddell loved, adored, worshiped and served passionately King Jesus. He wrote in his discipleship book, “I believe in Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, as Example. Lord and Saviour” (*DCL*, 37). Each of these is found in the book of Hebrews, but it is the theme of Christ

as our example that we find emphasized here. It is also one Eric would address at some length in his only book *The disciplines of the Christian life*. There he would write, “Have a great aim—have a high standard—make Jesus your ideal. Be like him in character. Be like him in outlook and attitude towards God and man....Make him an ideal not merely to be admired but also to be followed (72). But having him as an example or ideal was not enough and Eric well understood this. Thus he would add, “I find I need more than an ideal: I need a Saviour to save me from the *guilt of sin*; to save me from the *power of sin*. I need a Saviour whose *grace is sufficient to enable me to live a life of unselfish service and love*” (74). Thus he would add as an aid to our daily quiet time, “Accept Christ into your life for today, with all his qualities of outgoing love, honesty, purity, and unselfishness, and with his passion to do God’s will. Where you failed yesterday to measure up to Christ’s standards, be honest about it; accept promptly God’s forgiveness and release in Chris; *get up and go on* in his strength.” (*DCL*, 39).

1) Look to Jesus. 12:2

Verse two calls us to keep our eyes on Jesus as we run. “Keeping” is a good rendering of a present tense participle. The idea is to go forward and move ahead gluing your eyes to Jesus so that you are not distracted by anything else. Like a faithful mate in marriage we are to have eyes only for Jesus. Why? The text tells us: he is “the source and perfector of our faith.” Jesus saves us and Jesus sustains us all the way to the end! He gets us in the race and He will get us to the finish line. And, He is more than sufficient for this task because He also ran in a race, a race that took Him to the cross where He paid in full the penalty of sin as our substitute. This death was a joy to Him, one He willingly endured for the glory of His Father and the good of sinners, one in which He despised the shame of it, and one that resulted in his being seated, exalted, at the right hand of God’s throne (cf. Ps. 2; 110).

Eric would see a connection between looking to Jesus and the Christian grace of humility, “*Humility looks at its sins* (self-examination) but also *looks beyond them* to the Savior from sin and casts itself upon his mercy...*Humility is powerful*, for it is based on the sense of being absolutely dependent on the grace of God (*DCL*, 36-37).

Eric was also captivated by both the cross and resurrection of Jesus. He would write, “*Jesus is the Son of God. The stupendous mystery of the cross has now to be revealed....The cross must be. No cross. No crown...* this cross [is] where men saw revealed the magnitude of God’s love and the awfulness of their own sin. Nor was that all, for there was the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world. *Forgiveness!* O blessed word to those bowed down by the guilt of sin....The cross is not the end; there follows the victory of the resurrection....The resurrection has a meaning for life. *It means the possibility of new life here and now, a risen life, a new quality of being.* Life! Eternal life!...Christ has risen! No wonder the hymns about the resurrection resound with hallelujahs, for his resurrection brings to everyone the victory of God in life and death. New life! New joy! New hope! (*DCL*, 56-58).

2) Think about Jesus. 12:3

Verse three says “Consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself...” The word “consider” is an imperative, a word of command. It means to study, meditate upon, carefully analyze. Think on the passion of the Christ so that you won’t grow weary and lose heart”, regardless of the circumstances you face. Press on with your heart and mind fixed on Jesus. You can trust Him to get you home.

Just before Pearl Harbour in 1941, Eric arranged for his pregnant wife Florence and two daughters to leave China. He had planned to follow them but that would never happen. Eric would die in China never seeing his third little girl. However, this champion for Christ did not

despair. He would not grow weary and lose heart. He would continue to serve as a faithful missionary until he was sent to internment camp in Weihsien in August 1943. There he would continue to serve King Jesus faithfully and be an inspiration to many, especially the children who fondly called him Uncle Eric. In what David Mitchell, a fellow missionary who was imprisoned with Eric called, “the squalor of the open cesspools, rats, flies and disease in the crowded camp, life took on a normal routine, though without the faithful and cheerful support of Eric Liddell, many people would never have been able to manage.” Once more David Mitchell raised the question, “What was his secret?” His answer, “He unreservedly committed his life to Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord. That friendship meant everything to him. By the flickering light of a peanut-oil lamp, early each morning he and a room-mate in the men’s cramped dormitory studied the Bible and talked with God for an hour. As a Christian, Eric Liddell’s desire was to know God more deeply, and as a missionary, to make him known more fully.” (“I Remember Eric Liddell” in *DCL*, 13-15). And this he did both in life and death.

Conclusion:

Eric Liddell died in a Japanese internment camp in Weihsien, China on February 21, 1945 just a few months before the end of World War II. He would be buried there as well. He had an inoperable brain tumor that later was discovered through an autopsy. The nation of Scotland would weep. The *Glasgow Evening News* would write, “Scotland has lost a son who did her proud every hour of his life.” Contrary to popular opinion he never said, “God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure.” However, he did say, “We are all missionaries. Wherever we go we either bring people nearer to Christ or we repel them from Christ.” Eric Liddell faithfully and consistently did the former, living a life that was a fragrant aroma of the King he

loved and served until the very end. If one had any doubts about this, listen to the testimonies of those who knew him best.

David McGavin, General Secretary of the National Bible Society of Scotland:

“Eric Liddell was the most Christlike man I ever knew, and there are many who, like me, think God upon every remembrance of him.” (*Running*, 187).

Arnold Bryson, London Missionary Society:

“Yesterday a man said to me, ‘Of all men I have known, Eric Liddell was the one in whose character and life the spirit of Jesus Christ was pre-eminently manifested.’ And all of us who were privileged to know him with any intimacy echo this judgement. What was the secret of his consecrated life and far-reaching influence? Absolute surrender to God’s Will, as revealed in Jesus Christ. His was a God-controlled life and he followed his Master and Lord with devotion that never flagged and with an intensity of purpose that made men see both the reality and power of true religion.” (*Running*, 189).

D. P. Thomson, close friend and first biographer of Eric Liddell:

“Never in the years we worked together — in shadow or in sunshine, in times of testing and difficulty, in hours of exhilarating triumph — did I hear him say or know him do anything of which I can imagine Christ would have disapproved. His was the most consistent Christian character, as well as one of the most attractive and winning of personalities of any man I have ever known intimately.

With it all went his unfailing sense of humour — ‘that smiling face, with the twinkling blue eyes,’ as the one who knew him best described it — his character, his readiness to help personally at the cost of any inconvenience or self-sacrifice, his wish that others and not he

should have the glory when success crowned his efforts, and his intense desire to be ever in the path of obedience to Him to whom he had given his all.

Athlete, evangelist, missionary-friend, husband and father — he has been missed as few men of his generation have been. By multitudes he is remembered with affection and gratitude as one in whose life they saw so much of the strength and beauty of Christ.” (*Running*, 195).

Norman Cliff, fellow-internee in Weihsien:

“Eric Liddell would say, ‘When you speak on me, give the glory to my Master, Jesus Christ He would want us to see the Christ whom he served.’” (*Running*, 206).

An unknown prostitute from Tientsin who told how Eric put up a shelf for her:

“He was the first man to do something for me without asking for a favor in return.” (*Pure Gold*, 285).

Florence Liddell, his wife: “I feel that Eric and I had as much happiness in our few short years together (not quite 11 years) as many couples have in a whole lifetime and I thank God for the privilege of being Eric’s wife.

I only hope the children will take after Eric and follow in their Master’s footsteps” (*Pure Gold*, 290).

Nurse Annie Buchan was with Eric Liddell as he died. Just before he lapsed into a coma from which he would not awake he said to her, “Anne, it is surrender.” With those as his final words, God’s “Chariot of Fire” crossed the finish line and completed his race. It may well be that in his last words he gave us all the key to running and finishing well our own race for our Master and King.

So, what is the race God is calling us to run together as His body, the Church? I believe Eric Liddell has a word for us here too as we bring our all too brief survey of his life to an end.

“Jesus came to proclaim the kingdom of God, to offer its blessings to those who would take heed, and to instruct people in its obligations and responsibilities. When he left he committed to the Church the duty of carrying on this work. The Church is his voice in the world announcing the good news about God, calling men everywhere to repent, and inviting them to enter the kingdom. *Every individual in the Church shares this responsibility.* We are called to witness. Are we doing it?” (*DCL*, 125).