

## Running without tiredness - Isaiah 40:27-31

Gordon Randall - 18<sup>th</sup> August 2012

### Introduction

Many of you will have seen the film "Chariots of Fire", an outstanding film about a Christian Eric Liddell, who refuses to run in the prestigious 100 metres in the 1924 Paris Olympics because it involved racing in a preheat on a Sunday, which Liddell believed to be a ungodly use of Sunday. Liddell was probably the fastest man alive at that time and had been the favourite to win it for Britain. The Press and even the Prince of Wales tried to talk him into running but he refused. Instead, he went to church that Sunday and read the same passage we've heard this morning from Isaiah. And verse 31 seems to capture the situation. "But those who hope in the Lord...will run and not grow weary". Remarkably Liddell was later (unexpectedly) given the chance to race for Britain in the 400 metres instead a race he had never even run before. And God honoured him for his stand. Liddell ran the 400 metres at a 100m pace. The experts thought he was running the first 100 metres too fast and would tire later in the race. But it wasn't to be and he won with a new world record.

It's an amazing story but we do need to be careful with what this story and our reading are saying. As we hear about the faithful Eric Liddell recognise this is not saying - if we give something up God will somehow give us something back. We also mustn't look at this and believe 'not growing weary' is some kind of physical buzz God will give us – that he will make us physically strong. However, what this story and our reading this morning do illustrate is when we honour God he doesn't let us down. When we trust in God, wait on God and place our hope in God He will renew our *spiritual* strength. And it's important to recognise our dependence on God, He wants us to rely on him, whatever we are doing. Yes - there are times when we want to chuck the towel in - but when we look to our Lord, he will RENEW our spiritual strength.

So let's look at our reading we've heard this morning. I've broken things down into two sections.

1. Renewing our strength
2. Honouring God

### Context

But first some background. Imagine yourself living as one of God's people at the time of Isaiah. You represent a very small country called Judah and all around you are bigger and stronger nations. One of your neighbours is the powerful kingdom of Babylon with its fearsome army and reputation for destroying any nation in its path... and there you sit right in the way of where Babylon wants to expand its borders. Imagine how you'd feel – probably anxious, exposed, weak, threatened and very vulnerable. These people were trying everything in their own strength to overcome what faced them – in particular praying to the gods of neighbouring nations and making unhealthy alliances with them.

Its interesting way to react – because remember Judah represents the people of God and yet as they come under threat from the Babylonians they turn their back on God to seek out other sources of power? It seems a bit crazy – but living in that situation – how would we react? We'd be afraid and desperate for whatever help we could get. We wonder why they failed to trust God but is it any different for us now. Do we act differently when our own happiness and inner peace are threatened? Relationship breakdown, job loss, illness, bereavement, financial difficulties to name but a few. In tough time it's all too easy to lose our trust in God and reach out in our own strength to try and resolve our problems on our own.

Now I'm not saying when we face difficult times we just sit there waiting for God to come and rescue us. Rather it's important we remember God is alongside us, he can be completely trusted and has seen it all before. If something is unsettling you, remember God has had plenty of experience with people who are fearful, discouraged and upset – as our reading shows...the people thought God had abandoned them or was too weak or far too removed to be bothered with their problems. Verse 27 says: My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God.

And so Isaiah gives the people a reality check. Don't you know? Have you not heard? God can do anything? God's power is so great and he loves and cares for his creation, it follows then that his love for you and his concern for you in the middle of all your problems is unquestionable. And what about us today – well it's the same answer - He is still The Lord – the everlasting God, He is still the Creator of the ends of the earth, He still will not grow tired or weary and He still gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Those who hope in the Lord – He will still renew their strength. And as New Testament Christians we need only look at the cross to see just how much God loves us – there he died for us, unworthy though we are, and there on the cross he gave us forgiveness for our sin and hope for the future. But - as Isaiah says “those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength”. I kind of ask myself – How does that actually happen?

### **Renewing our Strength**

In some translations of our reading verse 31 says those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. Whether it's 'wait' or 'hope' do we just sit there doing nothing waiting and hoping for God's spiritual strength? To answer this let's visit the recent Olympics.

It's four years between each Olympic games and a long time for our athletes looking forward waiting and hoping they will bring home a coveted Olympic medal. But they don't just wait and hope - they prepare training with extraordinary focus, determination and faith in their ability - not just once a week but every day. Mo Farrer won double Olympic Gold in the 10,000 and 5,000 metre races. He ran without getting tired. How? – He trained, day in, day out in the gym and running 110 miles a week on the road - for years. Anyone watch the synchronised swimming? The winners from Russia train ten hours every day for four years – can you imagine doing that!? Imagine being chosen to represent your country at the Olympic Games. It's an incredible honour. But we have also been chosen to represent something. By the extraordinary grace of God we have been chosen to be Christ's representatives here on earth. How amazing is that. But just like an Olympic athlete is challenged to do their best so we are also challenged to live lives worthy of the calling we have received. We are summoned to believe in Jesus as the risen Lord and King giving him our complete and undivided allegiance for the rest of our lives. Our privilege is way beyond the Olympic athlete – we have the awesome honour of being called Christ's very own. And the really exciting thing about it is we are on the winning team. Christ, in his crucifixion and resurrection, was victorious over Satan. Christ is Lord of the whole universe, past, present, and future.

And so we are called to trust in God, wait on him full of hope because together we will get the Gold Medal. But as we wait full of hope just like an Olympic athlete we need to train – not just once a week but every day because being a Christian can be draining, it requires stamina - if we just carry on life in our own strength we will grow tired and weary, we will stumble and fall. Verse 30 reminds us: Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall. So how do we train? Three weeks ago Ian talked about the cyclist Bradley Wiggins' training preparation and picked out two phrases used by Wiggins 'no compromise' and 'no regrets'. In other words 'no compromise' in his preparations and in his racing so that ultimately there would be 'no regrets'.

Ian then described how Christians can train. Firstly reading the bible – the word of God in the Bible is our basic diet as Christians and as such we need to be making time to listen to God through his word. Secondly Ian discussed 'prayer' – Prayer is vital to our lives as Christians. Thirdly Ian discussed 'service'. The discipline of service helps us to grow in our relationship with Jesus and to grow in our faith. Fourthly Ian talked about 'fellowship'. Christians should be helping each other along the way. We all stumble from time to time. But when this happens if we are strong in our fellowship we are there to help pick each other up to walk with God again.

Christians need to train. Otherwise we can lose sight of the greatness of God and lose confidence in his ability and intention to fulfil his promises. We can forget that he cares for us and that he shares his strength with those who trust him - and then when our faith is really tested we can be in danger of discovering we are spiritually bankrupt and when the trials come we have no faith and trust in God in our spiritual account to draw strength from. Our training is crucial because God won't let us stay on the mountaintop for long because it's down in the valley our faith and strength will really grow.

It is easy for the Olympic athlete when the moment of glory arrives, the gold medal has been won and everyone is standing at the top of the mountain. But what about when that same athlete and their supporters are sitting low at the bottom of the valley. When the suns not shining and they still have to get up and train. When the swimmer Rebecca Adlington has to get to the swimming pool at 5am every morning, when Bradley Wiggins finishes 23<sup>rd</sup> instead of first, and for others when injury strikes and they just feel like giving up. Their training and preparation pulls them through. They get back on their feet, or their bike or in their rowing boat and they keep on going and come through the tough times.

I remember doing a presentation at work using Powerpoint – Initially everything was fine but halfway through the presentation my screen went blank. It was because I hadn't plugged the equipment in – I wasn't plugged into the power source and the battery on my laptop had ebbed away. It's the same for us – we need to remain plugged into God because he is our power source and he never has a power failure.

As Jesus reminds us in John 15:4-5: Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

So stay in training, plugged in – by studying God's word, praying, serving and be in fellowship.

### **Honouring God**

The Olympics provided many moving stories of battles and trails faced by our athletes and of how they overcame adversity often through the help of coaches, families, friends and others. All of the medallists consistently said "I could not have done it on my own" and paid tribute to the team supporting them. Many also talked of how bad times had helped strengthen them, mature them and grow them so they became stronger, more determined and even more ready for the games and their moment of glory. Well just like an Olympic athlete all of us at some stage in our lives will face some great battles and trials – indeed you may be in situation at this very moment. In those testing times we need the support of family, friends and our church family around us but most important of all we need to know God is with us and trust in him. He uses those battles or trials to strengthen us and mature us until that ultimate moment of glory when we meet with Christ face to face.

Earlier I mentioned Eric Liddell - a great example of someone who truly trusted and honoured God. He faced a particular trail when asked to run on a Sunday or face being eliminated from the 100 metres – a race he was sure to win. But his decision not to run on Sunday was actually not difficult because of his deep belief that the Lord's Day was for worship and rest. A more agonizing dilemma had come a year earlier when Eric was asked to speak about his faith in Christ to a group of coal miners. Liddell said of his struggle: "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." The day after agreeing to publicly share his faith, Eric received a letter from his sister, Jenny, in China. Written weeks before, it ended with this verse of Scripture: "Fear not for I am with you; be not dismayed for I am your God; I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you; yes, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

Eric trained as an athlete but he also trained as a Christian. He trusted God and he honoured God – and God never let him down. It's said Eric ran with his head lifted upwards towards God – it's a great image. So as we (just like the people of Judah) face trials, difficulties and battles remember Isaiah's message, those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength – So...

- Honour God by trusting God (in particular it helps us to be prepared when he speaks to us),
- Honour God by **expecting** that his promise of strength will help us to rise above life's distractions and difficulties.

- Honour God by being patient when he asks us to wait and **expect** him to fulfil the promises found in his word.
- Honour God by recognising every call from God is an opportunity for us to say “Yes,” trusting His strength and not our own.

And like Eric honour God by lifting up our heads to God as we run the race towards Him and glory. Honour God and he will honour you. He will let your spirit soar above this world. He will lift your spirit upon eagle's wings and you will be strengthened for the journey ahead. You will run without tiredness.

And to finish – last Tuesday I opened up my bible notes and they said this -

*It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus;  
Life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ;  
One glimpse of His dear face, all sorrow will erase;  
So bravely run the race, till we see Christ!*

Today, whether life is ordinary or difficult, keep pressing on. God has it all under control – if you are a follower of Jesus then run in such a way as to get the prize and at the winning tape you will see the amazing place God has prepared for you. The Gold Medal will be yours and it will be well worth it!