

Seven Short Lessons from the Life of Eric Liddell

The biography of Eric Liddell is well known and can be accessed online or in print. I enjoyed reading Duncan Hamilton's *For the Glory: The Life of Eric Liddell From Olympic Hero to Modern Martyr*. I have captured a few lessons from Eric's life based on his own quotations and quotations directly relevant to his life. I was reminded that Eric Liddell was an extraordinary runner but even more importantly, Eric was an extraordinary man.

Faithful

'Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.' **Exodus 20:8–11.**

Paris hosted the 1924 Summer Olympics. A devout Christian, Eric Liddell refused to run in a heat held on Sunday. He was forced to withdraw from the 100-metres race, his best event. Obedience to God was more important than a gold medal. Eric was a runner but he was also a Christian and a preacher. Eric did his best to practice what he preached, 'You will know as much of God, and only as much of God, as you are willing to put into practice.'

Fast

'God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure.' **Eric Liddell**

Having withdrawn from the 100 metre dash, Eric chose the 400 meters instead. On July 10, 1924, the day of the Olympic 400 metres final, Liddell went to the starting blocks, where an American Olympic Team trainer slipped a piece of paper into his hand with a quotation from 1 Samuel 2:30: "Those who honor me I will honor." In the outside lane, Liddell would not be able to see his competitors. Liddle, whose previous best time was 49.6 crossed the finish line in 47.6 seconds to win the gold medal, breaking both the Olympic and World records. The report in *The Guardian* on July 12, 1924 captured the race perfectly,

E. H. Liddell, the Edinburgh University sprinter, won the 400 metres final in the world's record time of 47 $\frac{3}{5}$ sec., after what was perhaps the greatest quarter-mile race ever run. The British champion, who, on the outside track, leaped ahead at the crack of the pistol, was never caught. He ran each of the three first hundred metres in 12sec dead and the fourth in 11 $\frac{3}{5}$ sec.

His strategy which seemed impossible proved to be true, 'The secret of my success over the 400m is that I run the first 200m as fast as I can. Then, for the second 200m, with God's help I run faster.' His first 200 meters were fast but the second 200 metres were faster.

Circumstances

'Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God's plans, but God is not helpless among the ruins. God's love is still working. He comes in and takes the calamity and uses it victoriously, working out His wonderful plan of love.' **Eric Liddell**

The racetrack soon gave way to the mission field. Eric heeded the call to serve as a missionary. He did not see this as a special calling but as the common identity for all Christians. 'We are all missionaries. Wherever we go we either bring people nearer to Christ or we repel them from Christ.' Eric had an attractive personality and his witness was compelling. However, his circumstances changed. The second world war found Eric and other westerners caught up by the Japanese occupation. Eric's circumstances changed but his character and his faith remain undaunted. Interred in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, Eric attempted to maintain good morale despite desperate circumstances.

Sincerity

'Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.' **Apostle Paul, Romans 12: 9**

Sincere is derived from Latin – *sin cere* or literally without wax. A sculptor working with marble would cover up any mistakes with wax. The imperfections would be obscured from sight. With heat, the wax would melt. Over time, the wax would eventually wear away. The flaws would then be revealed for everyone to see. When Eric preach, he exhorted his hearer to be consistent. Faith and life should be integrated seamlessly. We are to be 'without wax.' Eric was aware of his flaws and inconsistencies and yet his life was characterised with an evident sincerity. There is something attractive and compelling about a life lived in sincere faith.

Duncan Hamilton quoted a 1932 interview with the former Olympic champion but then a missionary in China. The reporter 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?' Liddell replied, 'A fellow's life counts for far more at this than the other.' Hamilton closed his biography with this epitaph on a life well lived, 'So true, so true. But only Eric Henry Liddell – that stillest of souls – could have said it with such sincerity.

Obedience

'Obedience to God's will is the secret of spiritual knowledge and insight. It is not willingness to know, but willingness to DO (obey) God's will that brings certainty.' **Eric Liddell**

It is easy for there to be a disconnect between knowing and doing. Knowing what is right and telling others what is right is one thing. Doing what you know to be right is quite another thing. Sticking to your principles when there is no cost and maintaining your principles when the cost is high is a measure of character. The willingness to do the right is a strength of character that was evident in Eric's life on the track, preaching in mission halls, serving in China, and living his daily life.

Growing in knowledge is relatively easy but a sincere willingness to do what you know to be right and to do what you know God is calling to do is the real measure of person's integrity and consistency.

Obedience is costly. By 1941, the British government exhorted its citizen to leave China for the situation was growing increasingly dangerous and unpredictable. Eric said farewell to his wife Florence and their children as they returned home. He remained obedient to his calling to minister to the Chinese in China.

Victory

'Victory over all the circumstances of life comes not by might, nor by power, but by a practical confidence in God and by allowing His Spirit to dwell in our hearts and control our actions and emotions. Learn in the days of ease and comfort, to think in terms of the prayer that follows, so that when the days of hardship come you will be fully prepared and equipped to meet them.' **Eric Liddell**

Victory can be seen in a gold medal or a world record time but for Eric victory could be evidenced in all spheres of life and service. Victory meant striving to be the best – not necessarily better than everyone else but striving to be the best that you can be. Eric once noted, 'Many of us are missing something in life because we are after the second best.' In the 1924 games, Eric enjoyed victory over his rivals. Eric enjoyed victory in much different settings as he served as a missionary to the Chinese people and as he ministered to his fellow POWs during the war. Eric was prepared for the days of hardship when they came. Dying of a brain tumour and being buried in an unidentifiable grave hardly seems victorious yet Eric's faith enabled him to face life's triumphs and tragedy with optimism.

Glory

'In the dust of defeat as well as the laurels of victory there is a glory to be found if one has done his best.' **Eric Liddell**

Duncan Hamilton entitled his biography of Eric Liddell, *For the Glory*. God made Eric fast. Eric was also persuaded that 'God made me for China.' Most of us will never attend the Olympics in person, let alone compete and win a gold medal. We won't cross the world to serve among a different people in a distant land. We will not experience the trials of imprisonment or the heartache of separation from family. Eric Liddell was one of those extraordinary characters who story makes us feel better just for knowing about him. It would have been a privilege to have met him and seen for ourselves, his fleetness of foot and observed his sincerity of his character.

It is impossible and unfair to put words into his mouth but I wonder whether as we read these reflections on a life well lived, Eric might quote from the apostle Paul, 'So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.' **1 Corinthians 10:31**

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