



Playing sport in war

Sermon - Steve Stanis

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Genesis 32:24-30 & Philippians 3:20-4:9

Introduction:

Many of us are competitive when it comes to sport! We play to win! Have you ever been in a grand final? The title matters; winning matters; oh to be victorious! The power and depth of the concept of 'victory'... At the same time, the comradery of mates sticking together.

I was reflecting on Shane Warne's sudden and early death. The intensity of the loss of his life was magnified by the 'blokeyness' that made Shane somehow connected to us all. The memorial service at the MCG achieved that!

Bill has shared some fascinating insights about soldiers playing sport in times of war and these set up the contrast as to how to live in and through war with a sporting attitude and approach to others... a great reflection of playing sport in war over the twentieth century. Or is it all Greek to you?

Let's look back a little further...

The Modern Olympics - playing sport in war

In 1896 a new movement commenced now known and loved by many as the modern Olympic Games. In 1916 in Berlin, 1940 in Tokyo, and 1944 in London the Olympic Games were cancelled due to the first and second world wars. War or tension between nations either banned or self-banned nations from

competing for various times and reasons over the intervening thirty-two Olympic Games.

The Original Olympics playing sport in war

Let's go back a little further still...

The earliest records of playing sport in war are recorded by the Greeks in 776BC; these became known to us as the Olympic Games. The various independent states within Greece at that time were constantly at war; yet in the summer they would put down their weapons to compete in an historically evolving variety of sports... meeting and playing sport despite being at war.

We might smile and wonder why it had to be naked??

Thoughts? It is because of hidden weapons compromising the peace.

A favourite Greek sport at that time was wrestling. Let's review what the Bible says about this almost back to the beginning of time!

Wrestling with God face to face (Gen 32:24-30):

The account read to us from Genesis about Jacob grapples with wrestling. Four chapters earlier Jacob is given a vision that should have given him absolute assurance that God is in control. We read about this dream in Genesis 28:12-13:

¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

¹³ There above it stood the LORD, and he said:

"I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying."

God speaks to Jacob from the dream and assures him that he is not alone. God will be with him, will take care of him, will return him to his home and will bless him and his descendants. Jacob had confidence in the finality of victory in God at that point yet it was not enough! Jacob endured a war within himself. Have you had the same experience where your faith is shaken by a war within yourself?

In our reading (Genesis in 32:24-28) Jacob is wrestling with a man all night and yet without peace. At times, are your nights like this? Imagine what nights must have been like through war times....

Just like Jacob, in our wrestling, we do not always recognise God for who he is. Genesis 32:29:

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?"

Then he blessed him there.

It's a new day. Wrestling can end well. God is not scared of our doubts. We can wrestle with God and bring our fears before him. Like Jacob, we can trust there will be a new day where we will find peace.

With the new day, Jacob has recognised the face of God. He has wrestled with God throughout the night but only understands when the face of God is revealed. His

understanding of the truth and the need for his trust becomes evident. At this moment he has been assured of his dream of heaven.

Jacob's wrestling within this passage (Genesis 32:24-30) encapsulates his past, present and future, all of which rests on God's mercy to him.

The trust and the hope that God will have the victory in war and peace! (Philippians: 3:20-4:9)

Let's move forward in time to a Greek first century city, a place where the original Olympic Games were contested. At this time the Battle of Philippi was raging, part of the long series of civil wars that upset Rome during the first century BC. Here is the back drop for the life of Jesus...

Wars, Olympic Games and a new world order in Jesus.

So let's go to Philippians to understand more about what Jesus has to say about this? We investigate the truth of war and the peace of living in Jesus' purpose and ways.

Firstly 'Recognising the world' (3:20a)

Where is our true ultimate home?

By war we may be called to protect the sovereignty of our nations, our states, and our homes. The catastrophe of watching the current daily news of Ukraine for me has been captured in the faces of the people telling of lives lost and viewing homes destroyed.

Yet Paul, the writer of the Bible book Philippians, records:

But our citizenship is in heaven. (3:20a)

How do each of us view this statement. Is my life ultimately about earth or beyond earth? Jesus faced this question and gave an answer for us all to consider.

Jesus gave his life for each one who by faith takes Jesus as their saviour. This earth, although I'm responsible for it while I live, is not my final home. Jesus claimed the heavenly home for all who follow him by faith. True focus and perspective will ultimately find true peace, even when wrestling with the struggles of life.

Secondly 'Remembering Jesus will come' (3:20b)

In war, others may come for our homes. They can never truly own it. All is owned by our God the Creator.

Under the pressures and powers within life, we are urged to remember that Jesus will come for us.

And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. (3:20b)

The apostle Paul says we eagerly await his return. In other words, those who love Jesus can't wait to see him face to face. Jesus has not forgotten us, regardless how much we grapple with the struggle of forgetting and remembering, of war and peace!

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God: believe also in me." (John 14:1).

To any question we may have, Jesus reminds each one of us with this answer....

"I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6).

Jesus is coming, be ready!

Thirdly 'Realising you will be eternally transformed' (3:20c-21)

We must recognise this world is not our home, remember that Jesus will come for us and, thirdly, realise we are being eternally transformed.

Wars only ever remain on earth and victory is never whole on earth either. No more war, suffering, pain, anguish, fighting or mourning or even death.

Being transformed on earth is everything for life and beyond our hopes, dreams and victories.

Paul the living disciple reminds us today as he did in Philippi (3:20c-21):

"...the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."

The transformation has already begun. When we come to know Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Saviour, the process of transformation that we call salvation (eternal life) has started here and now on earth. One day it will be completed when our physical bodies are transformed into our heavenly bodies... new bodies.

If you have ever been a doubter, listen to these words from another church in Greece called Corinth, recorded by Paul around five years earlier than in Philippi.

1 Corinthians 15:50-54:

⁵⁰ I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—

⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

⁵⁴ When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

There we will have bodies that will never get sick. Our bodies will never experience pain again... never growing old or dying.

No more loss. Always with peace. We will live forever!

Fourthly, 'Respond standing firm with your hope in Christ' (4:1)

War is the unfair use of power. In Christ, we must realign and be restored. This is how we stand firm. (Philippians 4:1):

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!"

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said,

²⁴ "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. (Matthew 7:24-25).

In this instance, standing fast required hearing Jesus' words and acting on them. For the Philippian Christians, listening to Paul's words and acting on them could be expected to have much the same effect.

To stand firm my hope must be in Christ. I am not in control. Is Vladimir Putin in control? This world within war and peace is not all there is. Putin's control does not encompass an eternal perspective. We are citizens of heaven. Christ is coming back for us. We are transformed and will live with him forever. This must be our focus and give us courage if we are to stand firm.

Finally, "Rejoice in Peace' (4:4-9):

Peace is an attribute of the Holy Spirit, and when you are walking in peace, you are walking in power. A peacemaker is not merely someone who protests against war; it is one who inwardly hopes in Christ. Rejoice in the Lord always.

Peace is fearless, calm and bold. Rejoice in the Lord always. In the battles of life, your peace is actually a weapon. Indeed, your confidence declares that you are not falling for the lies of the evil one. We need to have peace in spite of our circumstances. Rejoice in the Lord always.