

# Sunday 21st July 2024

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[ 0 : 00 ] Wonderful words, aren't they? Let's pray, shall we, before we come to God's word.! Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that the most important thing about today is that you are here,! And that you want to know us, and you want for us to know you, and you want to speak to us.

And so we thank you for your word, which is the great way that you speak to us, Lord, that you hold out a message of hope, and life, and you invite us to become part of your family. Lord, please prepare us to hear your voice today, not mine. In Jesus' name, Amen.

So if you've been awake the last few weeks, you'll realise that the football's done. Small cheer. And the tennis is done as well. But the rain apparently is not done. Sorry.

So thank goodness that the Olympics is coming up, for all of you sports lovers. And the good thing about the Olympics is that there's such a variety of things to engage with, isn't there? There's absolutely loads of different stuff.

Most anybody can connect with some story or drama that's going on in the Olympics, can't they? But I think, for me, there's nothing quite like the 100 metres in the Olympics.

[ 1 : 25 ] That, for me, is the main event. It's the one that everybody gets excited about. It's got so many iconic moments. Do you remember Usain Bolt when he was running? There was just a rising sense of excitement every time he put his feet on the track.

And there was a classic pose afterwards. I'm not so cool, so I won't do that. But what if I told you that it was possible to win a race by not running?

What if I told you that there was a top-level Olympian who won his greatest ever race by doing just that? By not running in it. And what if I told you that the secret of success that he had could be yours?

Is that interesting? These Olympics, don't know if you know this, mark the 100th anniversary of the race in which a man called Eric Little won a gold medal in the 400 metres for Scotland.

Now, Eric Little, in 1924, was the fastest man on earth. And he was widely expected to win the 100 metres. Pretty much considered a shoe-in for that race.

[ 2 : 39 ] And those Olympics were also held in Paris that year, 1924 in Paris, 2024 in Paris as well. But in order to run in that 100 metres race, he would have had to run on a Sunday.

And he felt that that would be disloyal to God to do that. That was his conviction. And so, despite, you can imagine it, the enormous pressure that was resting on his shoulders, and the fame and the success that probably would have followed if he'd run, he publicly announced that he was not going to run in the 100 metres.

Can you imagine if someone did that today? Public outcry. And let's not forget, you know, Scotland doesn't have that many 100 metres gold medal winners.

Sorry, Keith. It's a fact. Can you imagine that? And he said, no, I'm not going to do it. And instead he retrained for the 400 metres, which was not his event, and he wasn't favourite, and he didn't expect to win.

And it came to the race, and he won the gold medal. And not only did he win the gold medal, if you know the story, but in doing so, he broke the world record. And that's a pretty amazing story, isn't it?

[ 3 : 55 ] But it gets even more amazing, because he then gave up his career a second time, and all the fame and success that went with it. And he did that in order to follow God's call on his life to go and work in China as a missionary.

And when war broke out there, he sent his family away to safety, and he never saw them again. And eventually he was interned in a prison camp.

And there he cared for the inmates that were around him, and he taught them to pray for the guards. And that's where he died, in 1945, of a brain tumour.

I'm just going to show you a little clip from the film that was made, partly about his life. Probably know it, called Chariots of Fire. If we can get there. .

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[ 5 : 06 ] I've finished ready for a time I see the world and I see the blind You came to see a race today, to see someone win.

Happened to be me. But I want you to do more than just watch a race. I want you to take part in it. I want to compare faith to running in a race.

It's hard. It requires concentration of will. Energy of soul. You experience elation when the winner breaks the tape.

Especially if you've got a bet on it. But how long does that last? You go home. Maybe your dinner's burned. Maybe...

Maybe I haven't got a job. So who am I to say believe? Have faith. In the face of life's realities. I would like to give you something more permanent.

[ 6 : 18 ] But I can only point the way. I have no formula for winning the race. Everyone runs in her own way. Or his own way. Then where does the power come from to see the race to its end?

From within. Jesus said, behold, the kingdom of God is within you. If with all your hearts you truly seek me, you shall ever surely find me.

If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, then that is how you run the straight race. Thanks. We could almost finish the sermon there, couldn't we?

Because we'll just go home. There is just a little bit more. It's not hard to watch, is it? It's not hard to watch. And when Eric spoke in real life, people listened. They listened because he was an inspirational figure, understandably, of course, that he'd chosen in life.

But who was Eric's inspiration? It would have to be somebody pretty great, wouldn't it? Somebody to make him sit up and listen. And someone that great, I'd suggest that we need to listen to as well.

[ 7 : 42 ] And this is where we come to Isaiah, in one of Eric Little's favorite passages. So chapter 40 and verse 27.

Listen up, in other words.

So here is Eric's inspiration.

It's the God of the Bible. And do you know the first thing that we notice is he's not like us. God is not like us. I think I could probably run on the same track as Eric.

You know, I'd probably be 100 miles behind. But I could run on the same track as Eric. I don't think I could run on the same track as this God. Look at what he is like.

[ 8 : 52 ] The Lord is the everlasting God. He is the creator. He can make something out of nothing. He is untiring.

And his intellect is unfathomable. He knows more and understands more than I ever could. He knows the deepest secrets and the darkest corners.

And he knows what captures my heart and what gives me joy. See, God is greater. God is greater.

And do you know that's good news? It's good news that God is greater.

Because it means that he won't be swayed by trendy ideas. He can't be captured by conspiracy theories. He can't be duped. He can't have the wool pulled over his eyes.

Not even by me. Can fool a lot of other people. Not God. Because God is greater. It's no wonder that he was inspirational to Eric Little, is it?

[ 9 : 52 ] And that Eric Little listened to him because he's so much greater. And in fact, that is the answer, friends, to most questions about life and faith. It is that God is greater. And so Eric Little knew that when God speaks, if we want to run a race with hope, we need to listen to him.

The world offers us a lot of inspirational examples to follow, doesn't it? It's constantly holding up people before us to say, this person is an inspiration, you know, pathbreaker. Do you know what the trouble is with that?

We all kind of know, really, deep down, is that we can't be like those people. We can't follow them, can we? Eric Little's a great example, but I can't really be like him.

No matter how hard I try to follow his example, how hard I train, I am not going to win the 400 metres gold for Scotland. Am I? Because there are some things I just can't do.

I can't just identify as Scottish. Well, maybe I can these days, but... Really, I'm not Scottish, am I? And I can't be the athlete he was.

[11:06] I don't have his body and his constitution. So actually, although inspirational examples are great, they're not enough, are they? And Eric Little knew this, and that's why he asks in that video that we just watched the question, where does the power come from?

And that is a key question, isn't it? The power to run this race through a life which just throws stones in your path, with a body that falls apart, with a heart that loses faith and leads us astray.

Where does the power come from? Verse 29. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

The power comes from within us, yes, as Eric said, but not the kind of dig deep inside yourself and find the resources. Not, you know, search for the hero inside.

Not like that. But it comes from inside us because that is where God builds his kingdom by his power. And our God isn't just an encouragement to us because of how great he is.

[12:25] You know, and the Christian message isn't be more like God and you'll be okay. That's not a message of hope. No, we need him and he is the one to follow because out of his greatness he shares with us his power.

God gives us his power. Which means that I don't need to scabble around inside trying to find more and more resources to meet the ever-increasing demands from the world out there and hollow myself out in the process.

I don't need to do that because God gives us of his power. He gives us power to run the straight race as Eric put it.

Here's something else he says. The secret of my success over the 400 meters it is that I run the first 200 meters as fast as I can and then for the second 200 meters with God's help I run faster. So when we're talking about God's power being in our lives this isn't some kind of airy-fairy spiritual thing that really makes no difference in the real world. This is a power that infuses your natural gifts the things he's already given you with supernatural power and significance so that you are guaranteed to get over the finish line and win the victor's crown.

[13:53] God gives us the power. Perhaps you're sitting here today and you think do you know what I don't want to start the Christian race because I don't know if I can finish it.

Friend, the good news is you can't. but God can. He gives the power and so no matter what we're up against and whether we're at the beginning of the race or we feel like we're flagging towards the finish line that is his good news to us.

He gives us the power. Do you ever have those moments in life where you think I can't do this. I can't go to work tomorrow.

Or maybe I can't face going home after work. Or maybe I can't go to school there's so much going on there I can't do it.

Or maybe I can't do this marriage any longer. Or that friendship or whatever it is that's me. And I think if we're being honest we all have those moments don't we?

[15:07] And the good news is God can. And he gives us of his power so that we can. There's one other thing that I really would like us to notice when we realise that God gives us the power to run and it's this.

All of us are running in some way aren't we? But did you know that some of us are resting at the same time? Eric Liddell was resting even when he was running.

Do you know why? Because he knew where his future lay. Because he knew where the power to run his race was coming from. And he knew that the crown of life was waiting for him at the end no matter what as it does for anyone who comes to Jesus.

So as a Christian he could rest while he ran. Isn't that amazing? We're all running.

Don't you want to be resting while you run? Maybe you're thinking how? How can we have this power and this rest all at the same time which comes from God which lets us run with joy right to the end and which guarantees we'll get over the line.

[16:24] How? Let's go back to Isaiah verses 30 and 31. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall.

But those whose hope is in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint.

So the answer is by putting our hope in God. That is how he will give us of his power. How we will be able to rest while we are running.

Because the best of us get tired, don't we? That's what this is saying. The best of us reaches our limits even if those limits are far beyond normal. We still have them. But those who put their hope in God won't just be able to go beyond their limits.

They'll be able to do things that are impossible. We can't fly, can we? But God says we will rise on wings like eagles. How does that work?

[ 17 : 31 ] Because we do still get tired, don't we? As human beings. Well, Eric Little's life again points us to the answer. If we're going to characterize what his life was like then I think you could sum up his life by saying it was a life of sacrifice and service over success.

He had the world at his feet, didn't he? But he gave it up for God. How did he know how to live that way? How did he know to do that?

Well, it's friends because he knew Jesus. That's how he knew. Because Jesus gave up the glory of heaven, the ultimate crown, to become like us, to know what it's like to be always running.

And then beyond that he gave up his life on the cross so that our faults and failings can be forgiven and so that we can share in that resurrection life.

So that we can joyfully run not just now but forever. And that's what Conor's baptism shows, isn't it? Jesus dying and our old life and our sins dying with him.

[ 18 : 48 ] Jesus rising and our new life being with him in his resurrection power. Our hope is in the race that Jesus has already run and already won.

He's done it for us. And knowing that and trusting that then we can do things that are impossible like flying. Then we can do things which would ordinarily just drain us dry and run the race of life.

Then our future has wings if we hope in Jesus. Because God is so great that he cannot fail and Jesus proves it. Some more words from Eric Little.

many of us are missing something in life because we are after the second best. I put before you what I have found to be the best. One who is worthy of all our devotion.

Jesus Christ. He is the saviour of the young like Conor and the old. So we put our hope in him. And that's also the way we're to live as Christians.

[ 20 : 02 ] Running with certain hope. Galatians 5 verse 7 says this. You were running a good race talking to Christians. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?

We're to live running obediently to God's will. And here's Eric again. Obedience to God's will is the secret to spiritual knowledge and insight. It is not a willingness to know but a willingness to do God's will that brings certainty.

So we put our hope in him as Christians and we run obediently. And that's what you're called to now Connor. Eric Little gave up success and sporting fame and everything that could have come with it.

Didn't he? Because it would have got in the way of his running for God. So we need to ask ourselves what is it that God may be calling us to give up?

What is it that stands in the way of our running for God? What is it maybe that is causing us actually to be tired and weary and to feel like flying is about the least possible thing at the moment?

[ 21 : 14 ] What is it that we need to set aside as Christians for him? So we're to put our hope in God.

We've been talking about Eric Little today because it's the 100th anniversary of his race in Paris. That's one reason, isn't it? But there's another reason that I wanted to talk to you about Eric Little and the words of Isaiah 40 today.

And it's this. I want you to be able to meet Eric Little because he's not dead. He died of a brain tumour in 1945.

That's absolutely right. But because of the resurrection power of the Lord Jesus, Eric Little is now with Jesus, alive, in heaven. How do we get there?

How do we meet him? I think the answer is found in Eric Little's final words. Here they are. It's complete surrender.

[ 22 : 18 ] Those were his final words. That's what it means to hope in the Lord. You turn your heart over to Jesus as your saviour and as your Lord, as Connor has, and then he helps you run all the way home.

I asked my daughter to do some colouring for me this morning. Here's the results. It's a heart, isn't it? You see, it's a little bit torn and faded, a bit worse for wear, like many of ours.

Been through a few things. Now imagine if God asked for my heart and I did this. I'm worse off than I was before.

It's more broken than it was before because the only way to keep your heart whole is complete surrender to the Lord Jesus. Put your hope in him.

He will never fail you. Amen. Amen. I'm just going to pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the wonderful inspired words of Isaiah.

[ 23 : 40 ] And we thank you for the example of Eric Little. We thank you for his words. And we acknowledge, as Eric did, that you gave him the gift of being the fast runner, but we thank you that he worshipped the giver rather than the gift.

Thank you, Lord, that you've made each one of us for a purpose too. And thank you that, like Eric, we can enter into a personal relationship with you the same way that he did by making Jesus welcome in our life.

Jesus, who isn't just a great example, but who has run the race for us, who is waiting to present us with the victor's crown, who is willing to share of his power if we will only accept him in complete surrender.

Help us to do that, Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.