

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

Fred H. Wight

Copyright @ 1953

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Greek Athletics and Roman Gladiatorial Shows

FOLLOWING THE VICTORIOUS ARMY of Alexander the Great, the games and gymnastic sports of the Greeks were introduced into Palestine, and a gymnasium was erected at Jerusalem. These athletic events delighted the Gentiles, but were repugnant to the pious Jews, because they were of a demoralizing character. Those who took part in these contests did so with naked bodies.¹

Under the rule of the Maccabees these spectacles came to an end, but Herod the Great revived them, building a theater at Jerusalem, and similar ones in other places. The Romans carried on many of the Greek athletic customs, but came to give special prominence to their gladiatorial shows.²

THE GREEK OLYMPIC GAMES

Character of the Olympic Games. Although the four principal Grecian games were the Isthmian, the Nemean, the Pythian, and the Olympian Games, the latter were by far the most celebrated. They were held every four years at Olympia in honor of the god Zeus. The event began with special presentation of offerings to various gods and heroes. Following this there were four heats of short races to determine a winner; then longer races were held; and then came a contest of a five-fold nature including leaping, racing, quoits, spear-throwing, and wrestling; then there was chariot-racing, boxing, running in armor, and contests between heralds and trumpeters.³

Preparation for the Olympian Games. Contestants were under very rigid rules, which began with a prescribed diet for their meals at home, and for thirty days before the events began they resided at one place where they were under constant supervision. They had to agree to refrain from dainties, to exercise their bodies regularly, and to obey all of the rules of the games when the events took place.⁴

The Apostle Paul referred to this self-discipline when he wrote to the Corinthians: "**And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible**" (I Corinthians 9:25). And to young Timothy he said, "**And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully**" (II Timothy 2:5).

Prizes for winning in the games. When an athletic event was completed, a herald proclaimed aloud the name of the victor and the city from which he came. He was presented with a palm

branch by the judges, and the prizes were given out on the last day of the games. It came to be customary to give the winners a wreath made from the leaves of what was considered to be the sacred wild olive tree.⁵

Paul refers to the incorruptible nature of the Christian's reward - crown in contrast to the perishable character of the prize in the Greek games. "**Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible**" (1 Corinthians 9:25). Peter had the same thought in mind when he wrote: "**Ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away**" (1 Peter 5:4).

Allusions to races in the Epistles. Paul compares himself to an Olympian racer when he writes: "**I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus**" (Philippians 3:14). And as his valedictory, he declares: "**I have finished my course**" (II Timothy 4:7). The writer to the Hebrews sees the Christian's race as being run with endurance before a great crowd of spectators: "**Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us**" (Hebrews 12:1).

Allusions to wrestling and boxing in the Epistles. In writing about the Christian's contest with the powers of Satan, Paul likens it to a wrestling match, such as was part of the activity of a Greek Olympian festival. The contest was between two men each of whom tried to throw the other man, and when one succeeded in first throwing down, and then holding down his opponent with his hand upon his neck, he was declared to be the winner.⁶

When Paul wrote to the Romans: "**Strive together with me in your prayers**" (Romans 15:30), he was wanting them to put the same energy into their prayers as a wrestler would put into his efforts to win his contest. In writing to the Corinthians Paul clearly refers to boxing. He says: "**So fight I, not as one that beateth the air: but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection**" (I Corinthians 9:26-27). He is thinking of keeping his body under control lest if he fails to do so he be disqualified to be an effective Christian worker.

Allusions to various athletic ideas in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul was fond of making use of athletics to illustrate truth. To the Philippians he spoke of "**striving together for the faith of the gospel**" (Philippians 1:27). The words "**striving together**" actually mean "*acting as athletes in concert.*"⁷

In the language of modern athletics, he was thinking of the importance of "team spirit" in church work. And when Paul wanted to give a gentle rebuke to two women at Philippi who were not of the same mind, he also complimented them by referring to them as "**those women which labored with me in the Gospel**" (Philippians 4:3). The reference here again is to athletics. "These women were spiritual athletes."⁸

He was saying that they had worked with him like young men labor together to win an athletic contest. When Jude urged his readers to "**earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints**" (Jude 3), he was using "another athletic word."⁹

THE ROMAN GLADIATORIAL SHOWS

One of the chief forms of amusement among the Romans of the early Christian era was to condemn criminals, and especially Christians, to fight with lions, bears, elephants, or tigers in the amphitheaters of the empire before huge crowds of spectators. The crowds would urge on the beast by throwing darts or by shouting in a mad spirit. and then watch the poor victim torn to pieces by the animal.¹⁰

Paul referred to this practice when he said, "**If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus**" (I Corinthians 15:32). It is believed, however, that Paul was comparing his bitter experience at Ephesus (Acts 19), with such a contest in the amphitheater, because he was himself a Roman citizen, and the Romans would not allow a citizen to be subjected to a degradation such as fighting with beasts.¹¹

The writer to the Hebrews compares the experiences of his hearers to what happened in the arena. "**Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used**" (Hebrews 10:33).

The Romans had a custom in the arena to which Paul refers. Often they allowed the men who fought with beasts in the morning to have armor and equipment with which to fight the animals. But as a last event that took place about noon, men who were naked and without any armor or defense were brought in, and the animals were turned loose upon them.¹²

Thus in telling of the sufferings of apostles, Paul said: "**For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men**" (I Corinthians 4:9).

1. See C. Frederick Owen, *Abraham to Allenby*, ch. XIII, "The Clash Between Judaism and Hellenism," especially pp. 115, 116.
2. Thomas H. Home, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, Vol. II, p. 190.
3. "Games-Grecian," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, pp. 394,395.
4. Home, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 192.
5. Encyclopedia, *ibid.*, p. 395.
6. H. S. Miller, *The Book of Ephesians*, p. 222. (Harrisburg: The Evangelical Press, 1931.)
7. A. T. Robertson, *Paul's Joy in CHRIST*, p. 106, footnote 1. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1917.)
8. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 106, footnote 2.
10. Horne, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 191.
11. Loc. cit.
12. Loc. cit.

~ end of book ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
