

Title: The Bread of Champions

Subtitle: Nourished for Greatness by the Bread of Life

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/vwpmb5y1arg>

Thinking about the Olympics brings me back to my childhood when I used to eat Wheaties, “the Breakfast of Champions,” which always featured sports heroes on the box cover. The Olympics, with its many sports heroes, have always inspired me. I particularly enjoyed the opening ceremonies, filled with pomp and splendid pageantry. The discipline it takes to compete at such a high level demonstrates what dedication, hard work, and perseverance can accomplish. Because their stories inspire us, the New Testament writers describe the Christian life with athletic analogies. They say it is like a race to be won and a fight to be fought with a heavenly prize to win. Therefore, the resilience it takes to overcome commonplace injuries and setbacks encourages me to run my own race as I press onward toward the goal of the upper call of God in Christ Jesus. The heroes who inspire us have stories written about them that are long remembered.

The life of Elijah, featured in our lesson from 1st Kings, is one such figure. Most Bible scholars regard him as the power prophet of the Old Testament. Through his message and miracles, Elijah was responsible for reminding the Northern Kingdom of Israel that they were God’s people when the royal leadership was committed to Baal worship. Few understand the loneliness he experienced as he was hunted and hounded while many of the Lord’s prophets were killed by Jezebel, King Ahab’s wife. At the time we enter his story, he is beset with such difficulties and emotional exhaustion that ***“He was afraid and ran for his life.”¹*** Then, after a day’s journey in the wilderness,

¹ 1 Kings 19:3

he sits down under a broom tree and prays, ***“I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”***²

Experiences like this reveal the emotional exhaustion can get the best of us, no matter how faithful and dedicated we have been. Who doesn't face discouragement? After a disappointing performance in the Tokyo Olympics, even Simeon Biles wanted to retire and call it quits. But somehow, through rest and encouragement, she found the grace to get up and move forward, and now she is the most decorated gymnast in history.

Every hero has the highs and lows common to us all. Their vulnerabilities endear them to us. James writes in his epistle, ***“Elijah was a human being, even as we are,”***³ to remind us not to think of him more highly than we should.

Elijah seems to have been devastated by shattered expectations. The highs that he experienced on Mount Carmel (and a lot happened!) seemed to have come to nothing. The demonstration of God's power from Carmel did not bring Jezebel to her knees. Instead, it infuriated and provoked her to more and more hatred.

As Elijah lays down under a Juniper tree, exhausted and afraid, God compassionately dealt with him and sent the Angel of the Lord to feed him, not once, but twice. Each time, the Angel tells him, ***“Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.”***⁴

The offer of spiritual nourishment is similar to the one given to us in the Gospel today. Its invitation to a feast is central to all that Jesus said and did. But it wasn't readily received. The crowds questioned Jesus and requested more and more signs. The bread that filled their bellies would last no longer than a

² 1 Kings 19:4b

³ James 5:17

⁴ 1 Kings 19:7

single day, but the bread that Jesus offered would endure to eternal life.

The bread that Jesus offered was his body, which was blessed, broken, and given for the life of the world. The bread that He gives is holy and whole. It comes to us from a life engaged entirely with ours with all of its heartaches and trials. Like flour that a baker pounds and throws up in the air, Christ's life was beaten, bruised, lifted high on a cross, and given so that we might have life and life more abundant. Now, we can invite others to "*taste and see that the Lord is good,*"⁵ for Christ has "*loved us and gave himself up for us.*"⁶ Now, "*those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.*"⁷ Jesus promised, "*For everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*"⁸

The inspired writers of Holy Scripture also did not shy away from dealing with harsh realities and formidable obstacles. Our New Testament lesson from Paul's letter to the Ephesians addresses issues that would disrupt their unity and peace. Therefore, such things as falsehood, stealing, evil talk, and attitudes that grieve the Holy Spirit are boldly confronted. Paul tells them to put away "*all bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, together will all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ Jesus has forgiven you.*"⁹ Nothing in his letter denies the potential and presence of evil in the Church.

After reading these words, with their stark realism, I couldn't help but be reminded of an interview that Kevin Durant (a decorated NBA basketball star who played this year on the

⁵ Psalm 34:8

⁶ Ephesians 5:2

⁷ Psalm 34:10

⁸ John 6:40

⁹ Ephesians 4:32

Olympic team) gave this past week when he took some time to speak to the media after the U.S. Olympic basketball team was almost upset by the Serbian team in Paris. As I read between the lines, he was obviously frustrated and surprised at how formidable their opponents were. He described the game as a stereotypical picture of our country when he said, *“A lot of B.S. (except that he used the actual words) happens in our country, but a lot of great things happen, too.”*

If a person were to step back and see the big picture, the same thing could be said of the early Church. The pagan culture that existed in and around Ephesus was demoralizing. Attitudes and actions were creeping in to such an extent that Paul had a huge mess to clean up. In such an environment, it is only natural for patience to run out and grievances to add up. However, how one responds in those moments is the key to a better life. Paul never glossed over differences or suppressed dealing with conflict to get along. Instead, he encourages working through conflict with thoughtfulness and generosity of spirit, trusting that doing so will be constructive and life-giving for the community’s survival.

Finally, with our vulnerabilities and potential for failure clearly in view, Paul closes our lesson with the admonition, *“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*¹⁰

His life of love is the bead of champions. It will feed us and strengthen us as we run the race set before us. *Amen.*

¹⁰ Ephesians 4:32 – 5:2