

Eric Henry Liddell

January 16, 1902 – February 21, 1945

BECAUSE GOD MADE ME FOR CHINA

Introduction

It was a hot Friday evening on July 11, 1924 when the starter's pistol cracked into the air and the runners of the 400-meter race sprinted down their lane. One 22 year old athlete with an unconventional running style broke the finish line with his head back in an awkward style. This runner was Scotland's fastest sprinter. He was "the sprinter whose locomotive speed inspired newspapers to call him 'The Flying Scotsman.'"¹ Magnusson writes, "Without the slightest doubt, Eric Liddell was the greatest athlete Scotland ever produced – by his influence, his example and his capabilities."²

Eric Liddell was popularized by the movie 'Chariots of Fire' which took four Oscars and Best Picture award in 1982. He was born in Tientsin, China, to Scottish missionaries but left China at the age of 5 and was educated in England and Scotland. His major was science. He returned to China after the 1924 Summer Olympics and taught science, physical education and religion. He died in a Japanese internment camp in the land of his birth.

The China that Eric Liddell was born into was "a China humiliated and torn by foreign intervention and moving inexorably towards revolution. It was the same kind of China that Eric Liddell himself would die, forty-three years later."³

"As a child, Eric once fell very ill indeed with fever, which left him for a long time extremely shaky on his legs; when he was up and about, one lady was overheard to make the immortal remark, 'That boy will never be able to run again!'"⁴ Liddell was a superstar sportsman at school. He excelled in cricket and rugby. Even during his college days people started to speculate that he might be the fastest runner in Scotland and thoughts of him winning the Olympics in the 100 meter and the 220 meters were making the rounds. He won the title in the 400, a race he never trained for.

Liddell married a Canadian missionary from Toronto, Florence Mackenzie. The couple had three daughters together - Patricia, Heather and Maureen. Eric never saw Maureen.

¹ Hamilton, Duncan. For the Glory (p. 3). Random House of Canada. Kindle Edition.

² Magnusson, Sally, The Flying Scotsman, Quartet Books Ltd, London, England 1981, Page 41.

³ Magnusson, Sally, The Flying Scotsman, Quartet Books Ltd, London, England 1981, Page 20.

⁴ Magnusson, Sally, The Flying Scotsman, Quartet Books Ltd, London, England 1981, Page 22

Eric Liddell lived for the gold far greater than the Olympics gold - the gold of being able to bring the Gospel to both the citizens of Great Britain and the people of China. Along with all the rugby, running and studies, Eric's friend and future biographer, D.P. Thompson asked him to speak at an evangelistic meeting in Armadale, central Scotland. This was also his first public profession of faith. This was the first of many preaching engagements while he was in college.

Going For The Gold

Of course, the popular story is why he ran a race in the Olympics that he never trained for. Several months before the Olympics, the Committee announced that the 100-meter race that Eric was training to compete in, a race that everyone, including his competitors, thought he would easily win, was to be run on Sunday. Eric refused to run on the Sunday. Eric was a *Sabbatarian*. He believed that Sunday was the Lord's Day and was to be used for worship, not sport. He refused to run even though the hopes of the British team and indeed Scotland believed he was their hope of winning an Olympic gold medal.

The press and even the British Olympic Committee were dismayed and spoke poorly of him. He was seen as a traitor. But Eric stood firm. He had never run on Sunday and never would, not even for an Olympic gold medal. People should not have been surprised because a year earlier he dropped out of an international competition against France because it was on Sunday. As the race was being run that very day, Eric was in Greenock, Scotland preaching at an open-air meeting. "In his sermon he said there "could be no neutrality [where] Christianity was concerned." His explanation was succinct. "Each one comes to the cross-roads at some period of his life and must make his decision for or against His Master."⁵

The odds against him winning in the Paris Olympics were great. Two other runners already held world titles. "The textbooks said that Liddell was physically unsuited for the 400 meters. According to the coaching experts, the stamina and speed needed for it could be produced only from a slim, spare build. The runner had to be at least five feet ten inches to six feet tall and not too heavy around the shoulders. The body had to be well balanced, and the body angle for one lap was reckoned to be a slight forward inclination of the trunk from the waist. The step had to be lithe and springy. Liddell ticked none of those boxes."⁶

"But the thing that everyone would remember the 1924 Olympics for was the searing heat . . . On some days the temperature was as high as 45° C (113° F)."⁷ In addition, on the day of the

⁵ Hamilton, Duncan. For the Glory (pp. 72-73). Random House of Canada. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Hamilton, Duncan. For the Glory (p. 79). Random House of Canada. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Magnusson, Sally, The Flying Scotsman, Quartet Books Ltd, London, England 1981, Page 47.

race, Eric was assigned the worst lane. But a note in his pocket encouraged him. The team trainer had given it to him before he left his hotel room. It read, "He who honors Him, He (God) will honor."

As Eric rounded the last turn on the track, he threw his head back even more than usual and pumped his legs as fast as he could. Ian Charleson, the actor that played Eric in the movie, Chariots of Fire found it hard to run that way. "Then one day, on the fifth or sixth day of filming, I suddenly cottoned on to what he must have been doing when he ran. At drama school we used to do what are called 'trust exercises', someone will stop you, or you fall off a piano and trust someone to catch you. 'I suddenly realized -- Liddell must have run like that. He must have run with his head up and literally trusted someone to get there. He ran with faith. He didn't even look where he was going. So, I can see how that would have given him a lot of extra push in a way. He just let go and relaxed.'"⁸

Eric crossed the finish line first, winning the gold medal! He had also set a new world record! There was a most interesting fact that one biographer mentions. "Liddell did not stay around for long in the Stadium after the race. He had an address to deliver on Sunday at a church service in the old Scots Kirk in Paris for all Olympic competitors, and he slipped away quietly to prepare for it."⁹

There were many celebrations throughout Paris and later in Britain. He was a hero. But soon Eric announced what he had already set his mind on. He was going to China to serve his Lord." little. A minister in Edinburgh said, "He made us quickly realize that running was not to be his career. He was training to be a missionary in China, and he was to devote all his spare time until he set forth for the East in evangelistic work among the young men in Scotland."¹⁰

Liddell was asked why he was so willing to give up everything the Olympics now offered him. "Because I believe God made me for China," he always replied."¹¹

If God had made him for a purpose to go to China, why would he be running? When his sister questioned his participation in the Olympics before going to China, this was his reply: "I believe God made me for a purpose, for China; but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure . . . it's just not fun, to win is to honor Him."

⁸ Magnusson, Sally, The Flying Scotsman, Quartet Books Ltd, London, England 1981, Page 37

⁹ Magnusson, Sally, The Flying Scotsman, Quartet Books Ltd, London, England 1981, Page 56.

¹⁰ Magnusson, Sally, The Flying Scotsman, Quartet Books Ltd, London, England 1981, Page 73

¹¹ Hamilton, Duncan. For the Glory (pp. 124-125). Random House of Canada. Kindle Edition.

Going For The Real Gold

Eric returned as a missionary to China, where he had been born. Despite increasing tensions in the area, Liddell decided to stay in China and continue his missionary work. When the Japanese occupation made life dangerous, he sent his pregnant wife, Florence, and their two daughters to Canada. When WWII started, he was interned in a Weihsien camp. Japanese invaders placed him in this filthy prison camp, without running water or working bathrooms. “No one could ever recall a single act of envy, pettiness, hubris, or self-aggrandizement from him. He bad-mouthed nobody. He didn’t bicker. He lived daily by the most unselfish credo, which was to help others practically and emotionally.”¹²

Dr. David J. Michell, who was also one of the children at the camp, He wrote about Eric’s life in the internment camp:

“Eric Liddell often spoke to us on I Corinthians 13 and Matthew 5. These passages from the New Testament clearly portray the secret of his selfless and humble life. Only on rare occasions when requested would he speak of his refusal to run on the Sunday and his Olympic record ...Not only did Eric Liddell organize sports and recreation, through his time in internment camp he helped many people through teaching and tutoring. He gave special care to the older people, the weak, and the ill, to whom the conditions in camp were very trying. He was always involved in the Christian meetings which were a part of camp life. Despite the squalor of the open cesspools, rats, flies and disease in the crowded camp, life took on a very normal routine, though without the faithful and cheerful support of Eric Liddell, many people would never have been able to manage . . . None of us will ever forget this man who was totally committed to putting God first, a man whose humble life combined muscular Christianity with radiant godliness.”¹³

What was his secret? He unreservedly committed his life to Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord. That friendship meant everything to him. By the flickering light of a peanut-oil lamp early each morning he and a roommate in the men’s cramped dormitory studied the Bible and talked with God for an hour every day.

Eric Liddell never saw his own wife and daughters in this world again. After writing a letter to Florence from his bed in the infirmary, he said to his friend and colleague “It’s full surrender” and slipped into a coma. Suffering with a brain tumor, he died in 1945.

¹² Hamilton, Duncan. For the Glory (p. 8). Random House of Canada. Kindle Edition.

¹³ <https://www.epm.org/blog/2018/Feb/12/olympian-eric-liddell>

There, separated from his family, Eric lived several years before dying at age forty-three. Hamilton writes, "From infancy, Liddell had a bond with the Chinese . . . China was indisputably home to Liddell. Missionary work constituted the family business, and this was the only place he ever envisaged continuing it, whatever the sacrifices. To believe—as Liddell did—that God had given him a task was also to believe considerable hardships, sorrows, and separations must be endured to complete it."¹⁴

Receiving the Crown of Life

And while all Scotland mourned, Heaven rejoiced. A faithful servant had come home. "He considered athletics as an addendum to his life rather than his sole reason for living it."¹⁵ Dr. Norman Cliff, who was imprisoned with Eric, recalled this:

"Eric Liddell would say, "When you speak of me, give the glory to my master, Jesus Christ." He would not want us to think solely of him. He would want us to see the Christ whom he served."¹⁶

Once he was asked the question, "'Are you glad you gave your life to missionary work? Don't you miss the limelight, the rush, the frenzy, the cheers, the rich wine of victory?' And Eric's answer was this: 'Oh well, of course it's natural for a chap to think over all that sometimes, but I'm glad I'm at the work I'm engaged in now. A fellow's life counts for fare more at this than the other. Not a corruptible crown, but an incorruptible, you know.'"¹⁷

At a Memorial Service, Eric's old friend, the Rev Cullen spoke about the word that had been Eric's last. He said, "Let us now turn to the way in which he tried to work out that ideal. First of all, absolute surrender to the will of God. Absolute surrender – those words were often on his lips; the conception was always on his mind; that God should have absolute control over every part of his life. It was towards the attainment of that ideal that he directed all his mental and spiritual energies."¹⁸

¹⁴ Hamilton, Duncan. For the Glory (p. 144). Random House of Canada. Kindle Edition.

¹⁵ Hamilton, Duncan. For the Glory (p. 10). Random House of Canada. Kindle Edition.

¹⁶ <https://www.epm.org/blog/2018/Feb/12/olympian-eric-liddell>

¹⁷ Magnusson, Sally, The Flying Scotsman, Quartet Books Ltd, London, England 1981, Page 102

¹⁸ Magnusson, Sally, The Flying Scotsman, Quartet Books Ltd, London, England 1981, Page 176

Contemporary Application

Duncan Hamilton, in his biography of Liddell chose to entitle his book: For the Glory! Liddell's life embraced the answer to the first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."¹⁹ To honor God in everything is to win!

What does a life look like that "does all to the glory of God"? Well Eric Liddell appears to have exemplified that in a material way. Listen to these quotations:

- A. Prior to the 1924 Olympics, Liddell's trainer slipped him a note that read: "He who honors Him, He (God) will honor."
- B. In a sermon Liddell preached, he said, "Each one comes to the cross-roads at some period of his life and must make his decision for or against His Master."
- C. When he chose God's work over athletic glory, he said, "A fellow's life counts for fare more at this than the other."
- D. His life's ambition is stated as, "I believe God made me for a purpose, for China; but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure . . . it's just not fun, to win is to honor Him." He was able to do "all things for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31); and
- E. His final words encapsulated his life, "It's full surrender" – "absolute surrender to the will of God."

It's not a very manly, a very masculine concept, is it? Rarely is it couched in positive tones to surrender. It tends to be viewed as weakness. But like most paradoxical truths in the Bible, it is to the surrendered that victory is due. But to simply call the Church to surrender is incomplete. It is a matter of who or what you are surrendered to. I would argue that we are all surrendered to something. Liddell's example reminds us that the highest good is to be surrendered to the will of God – in everything.

What that meant for Eric Liddell is the same for you and I: "that God should have absolute control over every part of his life." That is the high calling for the Christian. Jesus said, "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?*" (Matthew 16:24–26, ESV)

¹⁹ <http://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/shorter-catechism/>

Surrender means following Christ (Matthew 16:24a). Surrender means thinking of others first (Philippians 2:3-7). Surrender means killing sin by the Spirit (Romans 8:12-14). Surrender means finding your life (Matthew 16: 25b).

General William Booth (the founder of the Salvation Army) was once asked to reveal the secret of his success. After some hesitation, tears came to his eyes and he said, "I will tell you the secret. God has had all there was of me. There have been men with greater brains than I have, men with greater opportunities, but from the day that I got the poor of London on my heart and caught a vision of what Jesus could do with them, on that day I made up my mind that God should have all of William Booth there was. "It was this which led Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman, the questioner, to remark, "I learned from William Booth that the greatness of a man's power is the measure of his surrender."²⁰

If you are a Christian, a follower, a disciple of Christ, the message to you on this Father's Day is this: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."²¹ If that is not true for you, I invite you to surrender your life to Christ, today. "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?"²² Jesus said, "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."²³ That is the promise of the Gospel.

²⁰ <https://www.family-times.net/illustration/Surrender/200312/>

²¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Co 6:19–20). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

²² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 16:26). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

²³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 16:25). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Reading List

1. Hamilton, Duncan. For the Glory, Random House of Canada. Kindle Edition.
2. Magnusson, Sally, The Flying Scotsman, Quartet Books Ltd, London, England 1981

Online Articles

1. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/for-the-glory/>
2. <https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/eric-liddell-4272.php>
3. <https://www.christianity.com/church/eric-liddell-greater-than-gold-11634861.html>
4. <https://www.scotsman.com/200voices/sporting-legends/6-things-know-legendary-athlete-eric-liddell/>

YouTube

1. The Story of Eric Liddell <https://youtu.be/egHEYnNSZeA>
 2. Chariots of Fire <https://youtu.be/KEtD0ybH7ns> \$4.99 CAD
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