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A CROWN FOR ROGER

2 Timothy 2:1-13; 4:7-8; Roger Lueck Funeral; August 17, 2024

Something I did not know about Roger until last year was that he held the Minnesota high school basketball single-season record for most points scored. Although he wore the state record crown for only a couple of years, his record lasted over 40 years in district five. Playing varsity basketball four years for Welcome High School, Roger set records in the era before schools were divided into classes based on school size. He was not just a big fish in the little pond of Welcome, but a big fish also in the big lakes of Minnesota large school district basketball powerhouses.

Roger's success on the basketball court – and he was quite an athlete in other sports as well – reminded me of St. Paul's statements in 2nd Timothy about the Christian life as a military or athletic contest. In chapter two he wrote, **“An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules”** (2:5). Roger was not crowned a scoring champion by breaking the rules and fouling out of the game all the time.

The Paris Olympic games ended about a week ago. If you watched the competitions, you might have seen how single infractions of the rules could disqualify athletes from competition, ending their chances to earn the prize: a gold, silver, or bronze metal. If you don't compete by the rules, you can't win the prize.

In 2nd Timothy four, St. Paul returned to the concept of the Christian life as an military fight or athletic competition. He was writing from prison in Rome. He had been tried as a traitor for refusing to worship Caesar as a god. He was waiting for the emperor's verdict in his case and, likely, his life would soon end. Church history records that Paul was found guilty and then had his head chopped off. He would be “out of the race” at that point.

He wrote shortly before his death: **I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing** (4:8-9).

The **crown** that Roger wears now is not for his basketball achievements. Actually, he did not earn that crown by anything he did in life, but received it as a gift through faith in Jesus. Like St. Paul, Roger's **crown of righteousness** was set aside for him by God for when he died. The crown of righteousness a Christian receives at his death is not based on us winning in life by being the best at anything. In fact, because of our sins we should be disqualified from even competing to receive the crown of righteousness.

Even as we remember and give thanks for all the good Roger did during his life on this earth, the crown of righteousness he wears in heaven was not based on any good works he did. Roger was a sinner, and the wage of sin, what is earned by our sin, is death. Roger has died, the consequence of being a sinner. He was not awarded a crown because he was "good enough" or because he achieved some level of success in his life on this earth.

In the ancient world, a Greek athlete was awarded not a gold, silver, or bronze metal, but a perishable laurel wreath for winning the competition. Roger's imperishable crown of righteousness was earned by Jesus Christ and His righteous, sinless life on this earth. What Roger and all of us could not do perfectly as God demands, Jesus did for him and us. Jesus kept perfectly all God's commandments. Jesus lived the perfect life on this earth, but what did it earn Him? Suffering and, ultimately, His death on a cross. The crown Jesus earned for being perfect was a crown of thorns, nails in His hands and feet, and a spear wound in His side.

Why did Jesus endure this injustice? He did it for us and for our salvation from sin, death, and hell. Because we cannot win the prize of heaven by anything we do, Jesus, the ultimate Winner, came to take the place of the losers. Every race has a winner, and if you are not that winner, you are a loser. In the ancient Olympic games, only the winner was crowned. In First Corinthians, Paul notes this. **"In a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize"** (9:24). There were no "participation" medals or ribbons for the rest, not even the runner up. Only the winner won the prize. Jesus ran the race perfectly and should have won the prize, but He forfeited that prize along with His life, and He gave the prize, His crown of righteousness, to us losers, us sinners, unrighteous ones before God.

Elite athletes spend a lot of time training – in the gym, on the court, in the weight room, and at the dining room table. A proper diet is important for good health and building muscles. One of the signs of declining health and weakness is a lack of appetite that leads to weight-loss and weakness. This is very common in those like Roger who suffer with memory loss. Helen often commented about this. It was hard to watch as Roger was losing so much weight leading up to his death. It was a reminder that his death was coming.

God's Word describes Jesus' victory over sin and death as a great feast of food and drink, as we heard in the Isaiah 25 Old Testament Reading. The **mountain of the LORD** referred to is the hill on which Jesus suffered, died, was buried, and then rose from the dead. As we hear about the feast God prepared there for us, we need to remember that Jesus suffered and died for our sins while He was hungry and thirsty. He fasted and died so we could feast for life.

**On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
And He will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
He will swallow up death forever.**

Those who wear the crown of righteousness forever in heaven feast with the One who is their righteousness, even Jesus Christ their Lord. He won their crown by wearing a crown of thorns on the cross. He fasted and thirsted so they could feast forever with Him since He is risen from the dead.

Until God's children make it to heaven, God extends His feast to us who are suffering on this earth, we who still hunger and thirst for righteousness. I'm talking about the Lord's Supper of Jesus' body and blood, eaten and drunk at Holy Communion. As Roger's life was drawing to a close on this earth and he was no longer able to attend the Friday chapel service with Communion, Helen's made sure his pastors visited him in his room and brought him Communion, which Roger was still able to eat and drink almost every time we visited him, even shortly before he died.

This was a great comfort for Helen as she, too, received the Sacrament with Roger. Eating and drinking Jesus' body and blood in true faith brings with it the promise, not only of the forgiveness of our sins, but also life and salvation. The feast of holy Food and Drink we receive now in the Lord's Supper promises that we will feast forever with Jesus: in our souls only in heaven after we die, and then later in our souls and glorious bodies when they are raised from the dead.

On this mountain the LORD of hosts... will swallow up death forever. It is important that we eat a healthy spiritual diet in this life if we expect to feast forever with Jesus and all those He has called to be with Him forever in heaven. God provided a feast for Roger here on earth so he could wear the crown of righteousness and feast forever in heaven.

At the end of the Service we will sing the hymn, "Crown Him with Many Crowns." Because Jesus was crowned for death and resurrection, Roger has received the crown of righteousness. Roger wore the crown as a record-holder for a while in Minnesota athletics, a record later broken and given to someone else. We give thanks today for the imperishable crown of righteousness he will wear forever and that He **has obtained the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.** Amen.