



TRAINING FOR TRIALS

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The word "trial" has different meanings according to its context. It can be a court case (such as a murder trial), a test (such as the clinical trial of a drug) a qualifying race (such as an Olympic trial), or a period of difficulty (such as a trial of faith).

When I think of "going through a trial" my associations are negative, but the word "trial," when free of context, is really neutral. When a new drug goes through clinical trials, it may cause bad side effects, or it may work even better than anyone expected. When athletes approach a preliminary competition, they are often excited about the trial, for it is a chance to prove their ability and go on to further competition.

Although it is never fun to be faced with difficult circumstances, I believe we can learn a lot about how to face trials from the way athletes approach tests of their physical strength. They prepare for trials, expect them, and look with anticipation to being tested and proven. Paul writes, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training" (1 Corinthians 9:25a). I have watched friends train for marathons. On many days, they are not eager to go out for a run. But they know that they must build their endurance if they hope to be able to run the race.

I don't believe that most prospective Olympians enter the Olympic trials because they love to feel their muscles aching and their hearts pounding. They come because they want to prove themselves and go on to compete for a medal. They endure tests that would overwhelm the average person's body because they are seeking a better-than-average prize.

The apostle Paul compares the hardships he faced to an Olympic race: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my

slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1Corinthians 9:24-27).

Most athletes will not enter a trial unless they believe they can make it. Likewise, God only leads us into testing that He knows we can endure. Paul goes on to explain, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

It is not that God has great faith in our ability; rather, He has great faith in his own faithfulness to us, to win the victory through us. When we face trials, we must not forget that there is a point to them; there is victory on the other side. Rather than folding under the weight of difficult circumstances, we should consider that this is what we've been trained for. May we expect God to supply the strength that we need as we run in such a way as to win the prize.