

## **What It Takes To Win**

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My beloved Auburn Tigers are 9-0, #1 in the nation, and have the chance to not only win the SEC Championship but also a National Championship. They also have the best player in college football as their quarterback – Cam Newton – who will most likely win the Heisman Trophy this year. They're a really good team with some really good players.

What has Auburn done that has gotten them to this point in the season? And what will it take for them to continue winning and eventually win the ultimate prize in college football? It's the same things that you and I must do as Christians to win the ultimate prize. I think Paul loved sports considering all the sports analogies he used. At the very least, he knew how to make good use of sports illustrations. One such analogy is found in 1 Cor. 9:24-27 where he speaks of running a race to win the prize.

In order to win the prize, both the perishable prize in today's sports and the imperishable prize that God will give us, we must first make a total commitment. We must give it all we've got for as long as it takes. A football season is not a sprint; it's a marathon. Life is not a sprint; it's a marathon. We can't just run for a little while and then drop out and expect to receive any kind of award. It takes a commitment to see it through, no matter how tough it gets.

In football, sometimes teams lose a game during the season but still make it to the National Championship and win it all. That happened because they learned from their mistakes, didn't quit, continued to play hard, and kept their eye on the prize.

The same is true with us in our spiritual life. There will be plenty of bumps along the way, times when Satan will try to throw us off course. We may make a lot of mistakes, but if we stick with it and honor our commitment to God, keep working hard, and keep our eyes on the prize, then with God's help, we'll make it and be rewarded by our Father who loves us and wants us to win. This is what Paul meant when he said "Run in such a way that you may obtain [the prize]" (1 Cor. 9:24).

In verse 25, he says, "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things." And in verse 27, he says, "I discipline my body and keep it under control." It takes great discipline and great effort to be a good athlete. Any great football player spends countless hours in the weight room, working to get stronger. He spends countless hours on the practice field doing drills over and over again, as well as implementing plays that will help him win.

Isn't that what we need to be doing as Christians? We can't afford to be cavalier in our approach to our Christian life. We have an opponent (Satan) who is working very hard to make us lose. Don't we need to be spending countless hours in the Word, working to get stronger spiritually? Don't we need to be spending countless hours increasing our knowledge and going over it so that when it's game time, we'll know what to say and how to say it?

What is our game time? It's the time that temptation comes - what will we do? It's the time that somebody asks us a religious question - what will we say? It's the time we have to make a decision about our priorities - what will come first? We have a lot of work to do. Let's make sure we're exercising self-control and that we're disciplining our bodies.

All this training is not for naught. It's not without purpose. Verse 26: "So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air." No, we have great purpose. There is another life awaiting us that is better than the best life here on this earth. God has promised to give us a crown. This isn't a crown that a king wears. Rather, it's a crown of victory. The crown the ancient Olympic athletes received for winning the race was the laurel wreath we've all seen pictured in history books. It's a crown that perishes within a few days or weeks. The crown we will receive will never perish. It's eternal. When being a Christian becomes tough, call to mind that there is a reason for all the hard work. There is purpose.

What else makes a great football team? Teamwork. They work together and encourage one another. They make it a point to help each other get better. They sincerely care for one another and enjoy it when their teammates do well. When their teammates are down, they try to pick them up.

We're no different as a Christian family. While we will be judged individually and not as a church, God will judge us partly on how we have helped our brethren in their Christian walk. Being a Christian is hard enough. Trying to be a Christian alone without the support of a Christian family is even harder. God's wisdom is displayed in his creation and plan for the church. He knew we needed each other's help. He knew we needed weekly encouragement from each other. He knew that it's harder for us to lose when we have great teammates who are helping us defend against Satan's attacks.

What does it take to win? It takes a commitment to keep fighting no matter how tough the battle. It takes discipline and preparation. It takes teamwork. God's already told us who will win the game. Are you on the winning team?