

PP1 Eric Liddell: Safe to Serve

We are in the middle of the 2024 Olympics, giving us the opportunity to explore the life of Eric Liddell, the Scottish athlete and missionary. We hope to learn some lessons that can make a difference to our own lives.

A hundred years ago, on a warm Friday night in Paris, Liddell lined up for the 400m final. He was running in the unfavourable outside lane. Yet, he led from beginning to end, and won gold in a new world record time of 47.6 seconds. Competitors and spectators were in awe of what they had just witnessed.

Liddell's performance in 1924 continues to grab our imagination to this day. This is partly due to the 1981 Oscar-winning movie *Chariots of Fire*. But there is more to it, as indicated by the number of biographies and films.

Sport has been a huge cultural phenomenon for well over a century and it can bring people together like little else – both watching and playing.

- Over 9 million people play sport in the UK each week.
- The top-10 most watched television programmes this year will all be sport, with the Olympics in Paris directly following on from football in Germany.
- Less than 3 million tuned into the first leaders' debate for the general election whilst over 18 million watched England's first match.

While Liddell certainly didn't intend to develop any kind of theology of sport, his story continues to teach about the relationship between Christ and sport. Observing how well-known Christian athletes operate in the public arena helps many Christians reflect on the approach to the integration of personal faith and professional life in changing world. To develop that theme, this lecture has three sections:

1. Christ, Liddell and Athletics
2. Christ, Liddell and China
3. Lessons from Liddell

PP2 1. Christ, Liddell and Athletics

PP3 *Liddell's short career as an elite Christian in sport*

Eric Liddell was born in January 1902, in Tientsin, China, the second son of James and Mary Liddell, Scottish missionaries with the London Missionary Society. Liddell went to school in China until the age of five. At the age of six, he and his eight-year-old brother Robert were enrolled in Eltham College, a boarding school in south London for the sons of missionaries. During the boys' time at Eltham, their parents, sister Jenny, and new brother Ernest came home on furlough two or three times and were able to be together as a family, mainly living in Edinburgh.

At Eltham, Liddell was an outstanding athlete, earning the Blackheath Cup as the best athlete of his year, and playing for the First XI and the First XV by the age of 15, later becoming captain of both the cricket and rugby union teams. His headmaster, [George Robertson](#), described him as being "*entirely without vanity.*"

PP4 University of Edinburgh

In 1920 Liddell joined brother Rob at University of Edinburgh, study Pure Science.

Fresher in 2021, ran 100 and 220-yard. In four months, went from unknown to prominent figure in British sprinting. [Glasgow Herald](#) hailed him "[one of the romances of the amateur path.](#)"

Rugby for university. Selected for Edinburgh District for inter-city match against Glasgow District in December 1921, which led to his selection to play for Scotland. In **22-23** season Liddell played seven of eight five-nations matches.

Summer of 1923 he won the British AAA Championships in 100 and 220-yard.

Evangelistic Speaking

April 1923, aged of 21, Liddell started speaking publicly about his faith in Christ. Influenced by 27 year-old **D.P. [David] Thompson**, As a student at Glasgow University, 'DP' created the Glasgow Students Evangelistic Union, leading several evangelistic campaigns between 1922 and 1928. Knocked on Liddell's door, having toiled for months to draw men to his evangelistic events.

Liddell was not a dynamic speaker and did not feel qualified. Later, Liddell described the moment he said “yes” to Thomson’s invitation as the “bravest thing” he had ever done.

Liddell recognised that there were potential dangers, particularly of “bringing a man up to a level above the strength of his character.” Success in sports did not necessarily mean that an athlete had a mature faith to role model to others. Yet sharing his faith brought greater meaning and significance to Liddell’s athletic efforts, helping him integrate his identities as a Christian and an athlete.

PP5 1924 Paris Olympics

By 1924, Liddell’s decision to speak up about his faith set the stage for his decision to step down from Olympic consideration in the 100 meters. Liddell was selected for, but withdrew from his best event, because heats were on a Sunday.

Schedule had been published several months earlier, and therefore his decision was made well before the Games. Also selected for 4×100 and 4×400-metre relays but declined as finals were on a Sunday.

Some admired his convictions, while others saw him as disloyal and unpatriotic, unable to comprehend his inflexible stand. Why lose a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bring honor to himself and his country? Throughout the public debate about his decision, Liddell did not raise complaints about discrimination and oppression. He simply made his decision and accepted the consequences:

Liddell's withdrawal meant his rival, fellow British athlete Harold Abrahams, won the race.

PP6 Meanwhile, Liddell trained for the 400, though his best pre-Olympics time, set in winning 1924 British AAA championship was modest by international standards. Few expected him to have a chance in Paris. If he had been mediocre in the 400m, Liddell’s example would have been forgotten. There is no Chariots of Fire without his triumph in the 400 meters. But he had a brilliant trainer in Tom McKerchar. At the time, many then believed that the 400 meters required runners to pace themselves for the final stretch. Liddell raced the whole of the first 200 metres to be well clear of the favoured Americans. Then, instead of holding back for the end, Liddell used his speed to push the boundaries of what was possible, turning the

race into a start-to-finish sprint. He broke the Olympic and world records with a time of 47.6 seconds.

PP7 Liddell later described his approach as “running the first 200 meters as hard as I could, and then, with God’s help, running the second 200 meters even harder.” **Horatio Fitch**, the runner who came in second, saw things in a similar light. “I couldn’t believe a man could set such a pace and finish.”

In the 1945 report of his death *The Guardian* wrote,

"He is remembered among lovers of athletics as probably the ugliest runner who ever won an Olympic championship. When he appeared in the heats of the 400m at Paris in 1924, his huge sprawling stride, his head thrown back and his arms clawing the air, moved the Americans and other sophisticated experts to ribald laughter."

Harold Abrahams said in response to criticism of Liddell's style: "People may shout their heads off about his appalling style. Well, let them. He gets there."

1924-25 Athletics Season

Scottish Amateur Athletics Association (SAAA) meeting in Glasgow, won 100, 220 and 440-yard contests and participated in a winning relay team. Only the fourth athlete to have won all three sprints at the SAAA, in 1924 and 1925.

These were his final races on British soil.

PP8 2. Christ, Liddell and China

*"God made me for a purpose, for **CHINA**, but he also made me fast."*

In a famous scene from 1981's *Chariots of Fire*, Liddell is preparing to leave for China to become a missionary, but is telling his sister that before he does, he's going to run in the 1924 Olympics:

PP9 "Jenny...Jenny, you've got to understand. I believe that God made me for a purpose: **for China**. But he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure. To give it up would be to hold Him in contempt. You were right, it's not just fun. To win is to honour Him."

To China [1925-43]

Liddell returned to Northern China at the age of 24 to serve as a teacher/missionary. He did continue to compete sporadically, including wins over members of the 1928 French and Japanese Olympic teams in the 200 and 400-metre races at the South Manchurian Railway celebrations in China in 1928 and a victory at the 1930 North China championship.

Anglo-Chinese College, Tianjin, 1925-32.

Liddell's first job was teaching wealthy Chinese high-school students. The school's principal believed that by teaching the children of the wealthy, he would help them become influential figures in China and promote Christian values. Liddell taught maths and science at the school. He also used his athletic experience to train boys in a number of different sports and was superintendent of the Sunday school at Union Church, where his father was pastor.

PP10, PP11 First Furlough 1932

Liddell was ordained a minister of the Congregational Union of Scotland. On his return to China, he married **Florence Mackenzie, in 1934**, whose parents were Canadian missionaries. The couple had **three daughters, Patricia, Heather, and Maureen**, the last of whom he would not live to see.

PP12 The move to Xiaozhang, 1937

Liddell was convinced he ought to leave the school and had to the rural north as a preacher and took a position at a rural mission station in Xiaozhang, which served

the poor. The London Mission Society felt it was too dangerous for his wife and children, who remained in Tianjin but whom he saw periodically on visits to pick up supplies. He joined his brother, Rob who was a doctor there. The station was severely short of help and the missionaries there were exhausted. Liddell suffered many hardships himself at the mission, with many muggings and thefts from the chaos of the Chinese civil war.

PP13 1943 Weihsien Internment Camp

In 1941 life in China had become extremely dangerous because of Japanese aggression that the British government advised British nationals to leave. Flo. (who was pregnant with Maureen) and the children left for Canada to stay with her family. As fighting between the Chinese Army and invading Japanese troops reached Xiaozhang, the Japanese took over the mission station and Liddell returned to Tianjin.

In 1943, he was interned at Weihsien Internment Camp, with the members of the China Inland Mission, Chefoo School and many others. At the camp he took on many responsibilities, teacher, chairman of athletic activities, warden of Block 23-24, preacher, member of the Discipline Committee. Above all, he was friend and helper to all. Liddell busied himself by helping the elderly, teaching Bible classes at the camp school, arranging games, and teaching science to the children, who referred to him as **Uncle Eric**. 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.

PP14 Langdon Gilkey, who survived the camp and became a prominent theologian in his native America, said of Liddell:

Often in an evening I would see him bent over a chessboard or a model boat, or directing some sort of square dance – absorbed, weary and interested, pouring all of himself into this effort to capture the imagination of these penned-up youths. He was overflowing with good humour and love for life, and with enthusiasm and charm. It is rare indeed that a person has the good fortune to meet a saint, but he came as close to it as anyone I have ever known.

His Death [21 February 1945, five months before liberation]

Though he had become an “uncle” and father figure to numerous children, 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 **ANNIE BUCHAN** “It’s full/complete surrender” and slipped into a coma. Suffering with a brain tumor, he died in 1945.

Langdon Gilkey later wrote, *"The entire camp, especially its youth, was stunned for days, so great was the vacuum that Eric's death had left."*

When five months later the children were rescued by American paratroopers and reunited with their families, many of their stories were about Uncle Eric. Liddell’s imprisonment broke the hearts of his family. But for years—nearly to the war’s end—God used him as a lifeline to hundreds of children.

PP15 Weifang Memorial

Liddell was buried in the garden behind the Japanese officers' quarters, his grave marked by a small wooden cross. The site was forgotten until it was rediscovered in 1989, in the grounds of what is now Weifang Middle School in Shandong Province, north-east China. In 1991 the University of Edinburgh erected a memorial headstone, at the former camp site in Weifang. The simple inscription came from **Isaiah 40:31**: *"They shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary."*

PP16 3. Lessons From Liddell

Fulfilment, authenticity and witness

PP17 1. Fulfillment

Sport can be a source of inherent profound pleasure and delight in God. Athletes can find the meaning of their experience bound up within the bigger story of God's work in the world. Liddell says: [God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.](#)

Liddell returned to Scotland only twice, in 1932 and again in 1939. On one occasion he was asked if he ever regretted his decision to leave behind the fame and glory of athletics. Liddell responded,

PP18 ["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 far more at this than the other."](#)

On the surface, his death seems so tragic. Why did God withhold from this great man of faith a long life, years of fruitful service, the companionship of his wife, and the joy of raising those beloved children? It makes no sense. And yet there is another way to look at the Eric Liddell story. The impact of people at the camp, and his subsequent impact worldwide, means that the apparent tragedy of Liddell's presence in that camp makes more sense, doesn't it?

Liddell's youngest daughter, Maureen, who he never met, she shared this after visiting the granite monument in China dedicated to her father's memory:

PP19 ["I felt so close to him and, more than ever, I realised what his life had been for. It all made sense. What happened allowed him to touch so many lives as a consequence."](#)

If we can look at Eric and his family's tragedy, and others' tragedies, and see some divine purpose in them, it can help us believe that there is purpose in our own tragedies too. It can help us believe the blood-bought promise of God:

PP20 ["All things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" **Romans 8:28.**](#)

I'm convinced Liddell and his family would tell us—and one day *will* tell us—that the sufferings of that time are not worthy to be compared with the glory they now know...and will forever know. A glory far greater than the suffering which achieved it. I look forward to meeting in Heaven this man whose Olympic gold medal was nothing compared to his humble service for Christ.

PP21 Dr. Norman Cliff, recalled:

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.

Liddell's secret was his unreserved commitment 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.

Fulfilment is found in Christ.

PP22 60 minutes before the 100m final in Paris, 2024, Harold Abrahams said:

In one hour ... I will raise my eyes and look down the corridor - four feet wide, with ten lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. But will I?

Ten seconds to prove his purpose in life.

Ten seconds to prove his worth.

Ten seconds to justify his whole existence.

Despite athletic greatness, he couldn't find purpose.

PP23 Contentment. I am 24, and I've never known it. I'm forever in pursuit, and I don't even know what I'm chasing.

Both lives defined by sporting and cultural achievements

Best kids ... normal for cultural achievers. Both were highly competitive, world-class athlete and wanted gold.

Underlying security because he knew his purpose: ‘God made me for a purpose. For China. And when I run I feel God's pleasure.’

His sporting, cultural and moral achievements did not define him.

His life was defined by the vocation he had received from God.

PP24 Scottie Scheffler, 2024 Masters shared how Jesus Christ gave him profound assurance under pressure, and it was not gained by winning.

My buddies told me this morning my victory was secure **on the cross**. And that's a pretty special feeling to know that I'm secure for forever and it doesn't matter if I win this tournament or lose this tournament

Good News: not defined by what we achieve, but receive: gifted by the cross

Received new life in Christ: secure purpose radically counter-cultural sport.

⁸ It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

Complemented by the belief that his athletic abilities were God-given gifts.

Received gifts to enjoy the talents given to us by God:

¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Win or lose, the God who loved him and gave him his talents did not change: **Liddell, Scheffler and others** experienced fulfilment and security in both victory and defeat. When he competed, Liddell knew that God loved him and called him to use his abilities to express the joy of God's goodness to him.

This secure identity is radically counter-cultural in the sporting world and itself a powerful testimony. The golfing world currently does not know how to handle this calm competitiveness as **Liddell and Scheffler's** golfing mindset is significantly aided by his faith. It is from his sense of fulfilment and security that he felt free and empowered to live and speak of Jesus.

PP25 2. Authenticity.

Shaking hands on line, holding to his convictions, giving away coat.

One of his fellow internees, **Norman Cliff**, later wrote about his experiences in the camp. He describes Liddell as

PP26 "The finest Christian gentleman it has been my pleasure to meet. In all the time in the camp, I never heard him say a bad word about anybody".

PP27 **Mary Previte**, imprisoned at Weihsein as a child, described Eric as "Jesus in running shoes."

PP28 3. Witness.

Unashamed of Christ in public and private

After the Olympics, Liddell had spent the next twelve months on an extensive programme of evangelistic preaching. Liddell travelled with Thomson throughout Great Britain on an evangelistic campaign, preaching a simple and direct message.

PP29 Many of us are missing something in life because we are after the second best. I put before you what I have found to be best – one who is worthy of all our devotion – Jesus Christ.

David J. Michell, who was also one of the children at the camp:

PP30 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.

Key is private witness at 'work', as for all, who don't have a biographer on earth.

Conclusion

This summer provides an amazing time for us all to have conversations about Jesus with those we both watch sport with and compete alongside. Liddell gives an example and some language to reflect together on why we do what we do and point to the fulfilment, authenticity and witness we have in knowing Jesus.

As we witness athletes experiencing the joy of victory and the pain of defeat in Paris, we can reflect with our friends on the contrasting perspectives of athletes. We can ask them how they would deal with a crippling injury or the momentary pleasure of success and allow this to open up conversations about meaning and purpose.

As we spend time with people this summer will we live lives which clearly show the fulfilment we have in knowing God our Father, and will we let that lead us to live authentic lives which drive towards witness about Jesus Christ?