

***Note:** These remarks are designed to be used as a stand-alone presentation or as a source of content to be integrated into a broader message. Possible themes for that message might include mission, service, purpose, calling, obedience, perseverance, a combination of those, or something else. The document has been provided in Word so that the copy may be copied, cut, and pasted as needed. Read as is, the remarks run about 15 minutes.*

---

5.21.25

## **ERIC LIDDELL: From Gold Medalist to God's Missionary**

MOVIE BUFFS WILL REMEMBER THIS.

AT THE 1982 ACADEMY AWARDS, "BEST PICTURE" WENT TO A RELATIVELY UNKNOWN FILM, WITH NO BIG-NAME STARS, THAT SEEMED TO COME OUT OF NOWHERE TO BEAT FOUR POPULAR NOMINEES, INCLUDING THE BLOCKBUSTERS "ON GOLDEN POND" AND "RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK."

IT OPENED WITH A SCENE OF RUNNERS TRAINING ON A BEACH TO MUSIC THAT WOULD REACH #1 ON THE BILLBOARD TOP 100, AND BECOME THE SOUNDTRACK FOR ATHLETES OF ALL AGES AND ABILITIES EVERYWHERE.

IT WAS CALLED "**CHARIOTS OF FIRE**" AND IT TOLD THE STORY OF A SCOTTISH SPRINTER WHO COMPETED FOR THE BRITISH OLYMPIC TEAM AT THE 1924 GAMES IN PARIS.

HIS NAME WAS **ERIC LIDDELL**, AND WHAT HE DID AT THOSE GAMES, AND IN THE YEARS THAT FOLLOWED, WAS FAR BEYOND OSCAR WORTHY. IT DESERVES TO BE REMEMBERED AS AN EXCELLENT EXAMPLE FOR HOW TO LIVE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.

---

ERIC LIDDELL WAS BORN IN CHINA IN 1902 TO SCOTTISH MISSIONARY PARENTS. AT AGE FIVE, HE AND HIS FAMILY WENT BACK TO SCOTLAND ON FURLOUGH. HOWEVER, HE DID NOT RETURN TO CHINA WITH HIS PARENTS, BUT WAS ENROLLED IN A SCHOOL FOR SONS OF MISSIONARIES IN LONDON.

IT WOULD BE SEVEN YEARS BEFORE HE SAW HIS MOTHER, AND THIRTEEN BEFORE BEING REUNITED WITH HIS FATHER. IMAGINE HOW DIFFICULT THAT WAS FOR THIS YOUNG MAN AND HIS FAMILY DURING THOSE FORMATIVE YEARS. BUT IT WAS DURING THOSE YEARS THAT ERIC'S ATHLETICISM BEGAN TO SHINE.

WHEN HIS LONDON SCHOOLING WAS OVER, HE ATTENDED THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH. THERE, RUGBY WAS HIS SPORT OF CHOICE, AND HE WAS QUITE GOOD AT IT, EVENTUALLY MAKING THE NATIONAL TEAM.

BUT CLASSMATES NOTICED HE ALSO WAS EXCEPTIONALLY FAST, AND ENCOURAGED HIM TO TRAIN IN TRACK. HE DID, AND BEGAN SETTING RECORDS AND ENDEARING HIMSELF TO THE BRITISH PEOPLE, THE MEDIA – EVEN HIS COMPETITORS.

AT THE STARTING LINE, ERIC WAS KNOWN FOR SHAKING HANDS WITH THE OTHER RUNNERS AND GENUINELY WISHING THEM WELL – BEFORE LEAVING THEM IN THE DUST ON HIS WAY TO THE FINISH LINE ONCE THE RACE BEGAN.

IT WAS NOT LONG BEFORE HE LANDED A COVETED SPOT ON GREAT BRITAIN'S OLYMPIC TEAM. HE WAS EXPECTED TO COMPETE IN HIS BEST EVENT, THE 100-METER DASH, AND WAS FAVORED BY MANY TO WIN THE GOLD.

---

ERIC HAD BEEN RAISED TO BE A MAN OF FAITH, AND THAT INCLUDED OBSERVING SUNDAY, THE SABBATH, AS A DAY OF WORSHIP AND REST. BUT THAT PRESENTED A PROBLEM – AT LEAST FOR THE BRITISH TEAM.

IN THE MOVIE, AS HE'S BOARDING THE SHIP BOUND FOR PARIS WITH HIS TEAMMATES, ERIC LEARNS THAT THE QUALIFYING HEATS FOR THE 100 WERE TO BE HELD ON A SUNDAY. IN REALITY, THE COMPETITION SCHEDULE HAD BEEN RELEASED IN AUTUMN THE YEAR BEFORE, AND ERIC TOLD OFFICIALS THEN THAT HE WOULD NOT RUN ON THE SABBATH.

FOR MONTHS, HE HAD TO LISTEN TO THE PLEAS OF PARLIAMENT, THE PRESS, AND THE BRITISH PEOPLE – SOME ANGRY ENOUGH TO CALL HIM A TRAITOR – BUT HE HELD FAST TO HIS BELIEFS. HE WAS ALLOWED TO REMAIN ON THE TEAM, BUT THE NATION'S HOPE FOR A GOLD MEDAL IN TRACK WAS GREATLY DIMINISHED.

---

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT HAD THE STORYBOOK ENDING THAT HOLLYWOOD MAKES MOVIES ABOUT – WHICH THEY DID.

ERIC WAS ENTERED IN THE 400-METER RACE – THAT'S FOUR TIMES LONGER THAN HIS BEST EVENT. HE DREW THE OUTSIDE LANE, CONSIDERED TO BE THE WORST AS THE RUNNER CAN'T SEE THE CHALLENGERS COMING UP BEHIND HIM.

AND YET, ERIC LIDDELL STUNNED THE WORLD, WINNING THE RACE IN RECORD TIME AND A GOLD MEDAL FOR GREAT BRITAIN. HE WENT FROM BEING HATED TO A HERO, AND ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS ATHLETES IN THE WORLD.

JUST BEFORE THAT INFAMOUS EVENT, A TRAINER SLIPPED ERIC A NOTE INSPIRED BY A VERSE IN 1<sup>ST</sup> SAMUEL THAT SAID, "HE THAT HONOURS ME, I WILL HONOUR." THAT CERTAINLY CAME TRUE THAT DAY FOR ERIC LIDDELL.

THEN, ELEVEN MONTHS LATER, ON JUNE 29 – [100 YEARS AGO TODAY] – HE WOULD STUN THE WORLD AGAIN.

---

BECAUSE OF THE MOVIE, MANY PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT THE FIRST PART OF ERIC'S LIFE, BUT THAT KNOWLEDGE ENDS ONCE THE CREDITS ROLL. IN THE FILM'S FINAL SCENE, THERE IS A MENTION OF WHAT HAPPENS IN PART 2, AFTER THE GAMES, BUT IT'S ONLY ONE SENTENCE LONG.

I'M GOING TO BRIEFLY SHARE THE REST OF THE STORY, BECAUSE WHEN YOU HEAR ABOUT HIS LIFE IN TOTAL, YOU'LL SEE THERE IS MUCH WE CAN LEARN AND APPLY TO OUR OWN LIVES TODAY.

---

IN THE YEARS LEADING UP TO THE OLYMPIC GAMES, ERIC HAD BECOME WELL-KNOWN IN SCOTLAND BECAUSE OF HIS ATHLETIC ACHIEVEMENTS. AN INTERDENOMINATIONAL STUDENT ORGANIZATION ASKED HIM TO SPEAK AT AN EVENT ABOUT HIS SPORTS EXPERIENCES AND HIS FAITH.

ERIC WAS NOT A SPEAKER. BUT HE FELT LED TO SAY YES, THOUGH HE WAS STILL APPREHENSIVE. THE NEXT MORNING, IN A "GOD-WINK" MOMENT, HE RECEIVED A LETTER FROM HIS SISTER IN CHINA THAT INCLUDED THIS PASSAGE FROM ISAIAH 41:40: "FEAR NOT, FOR I AM WITH THEE; DO NOT DISMAY, FOR I WILL GUIDE THEE."

SOON, STEPPING OUT ON FAITH, HE WAS SHARING HIS TESTIMONY AT GATHERINGS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, USING A SPIRITUAL GIFT HE HAD NOT YET DISCOVERED. AND THAT'S HOW – EVEN BEFORE HE WAS AN OLYMPIC CHAMPION – ERIC LIDDELL FELT THE CALL TO PREACH.

---

AFTER THE GAMES, HE CONTINUED TO COMPETE. AT AGE 23, THERE WAS NO TELLING HOW FAR HE COULD GO, OR HOW MANY MORE MEDALS HE COULD WIN. THE WORLD WAS, AS THEY SAY, HIS OYSTER.

BUT ON JUNE 29, 1925, ERIC LEFT HIS FAME, HIS POTENTIAL FORTUNE, AND HIS BELOVED SCOTLAND BEHIND TO BECOME A MISSIONARY TO CHINA.

WE DON'T HEAR MANY STORIES LIKE THIS TODAY – AN ATHLETE AT THE TOP OF HIS OR HER GAME, WALKING AWAY FROM IT ALL. WE'RE MORE LIKELY TO HEAR OF ATHLETES, BOTH AMATEUR AND PROFESSIONAL, HOLDING OUT FOR THE BIG BUCKS, AND SEEKING THE LIMELIGHT ... BY NO MEANS IS THAT EVERY ATHLETE, BUT THOSE ARE THE ONES WHO MAKE THE NEWS.

ERIC MADE NEWS, TOO – BUT IT WAS BECAUSE OF HIS DECISION TO ENTER HIS NEXT SEASON ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD, BECAUSE THAT'S WHERE HE BELIEVED GOD HAD CALLED HIM.

---

ONCE IN CHINA, ERIC BUILT A NEW LIFE THAT INCLUDED PREACHING, TEACHING, AND MINISTERING TO CHINESE PEOPLE IN THE RURAL COUNTRYSIDE. HE MET AND MARRIED FLORENCE MacKENZIE, A YOUNG LADY FROM A CANADIAN MISSIONARY FAMILY, AND THEY STARTED A FAMILY OF THEIR OWN, ALL GIRLS.

THEN, WITH THE WORLD ON THE BRINK OF WORLD WAR II, JAPAN INVADED CHINA. TO KEEP THE FAMILY SAFE, ERIC SENT THEM TO CANADA, BUT STAYED BEHIND TO CONTINUE SERVING DURING THAT CRISIS FOR WHAT HE THOUGHT WOULD BE A SHORT WHILE. BUT THINGS IN CHINA GOT WORSE.

ERIC AND 2,000 EXPATRIATES WERE ROUNDED UP AND SENT TO A JAPANESE INTERNMENT CAMP, ABOUT THE SIZE OF A CITY BLOCK. LIVING CONDITIONS WERE POOR, BUT DURING THAT TIME ERIC TAUGHT CHILDREN, ORGANIZED SPORTS EVENTS, PREACHED

ON SUNDAY, AND GENERALLY LIFTED THE SPIRITS OF HIS FELLOW INTERNEES. THEN THE WORLD WAS STUNNED BY ERIC LIDDELL A THIRD TIME.

---

AFTER TWO YEARS IN THE CAMP, AND A MERE FIVE MONTHS BEFORE ITS LIBERATION, AN UNDETECTED BRAIN TUMOR TOOK ERIC'S LIFE. IT'S BEEN REPORTED THAT HE COULD HEAR HIS FAVORITE HYMN, "BE STILL, MY SOUL," BEING PLAYED BY A SMALL BAND OUTSIDE THE CAMP HOSPITAL THE DAY HE SLIPPED AWAY.

ERIC NEVER MET HIS YOUNGEST DAUGHTER, MAUREEN. FLORENCE WAS PREGNANT WITH MAUREEN WHEN ERIC PUT HIS WIFE AND THEIR OTHER TWO DAUGHTERS, PATRICIA AND HEATHER, ON THE SHIP TO CANADA. FLORENCE WOULDN'T LEARN OF HER HUSBAND'S DEATH UNTIL TWO MONTHS AFTER IT OCCURRED.

---

WE HEAR STORIES LIKE THIS AND WONDER, WHY DID THIS HAPPEN? AFTER A LIFE OF OBEDIENCE, 20 OF THOSE YEARS IN CHINA, WHY WAS ERIC LIDDELL'S LIFE CUT SHORT? SURELY HE HAD MUCH MORE TO GIVE.

HIS FAMILY ASKED THE SAME QUESTIONS. HIS PASSING GRIEVED THEM DEEPLY. BUT LATER, REFLECTING ON HIS LIFE, THEY CAME TO BELIEVE THERE WAS A REASON FOR IT. THAT HE WAS MEANT TO BE IN THAT CAMP, BECAUSE OTHERS RELIED ON HIM. OVER TIME, THEY LEARNED THAT HE INFLUENCED FAR MORE PEOPLE THAN THEY EVER KNEW.

HIS DAUGHTER, HEATHER, CAPTURED THE POINT OF ERIC'S LIFE WHEN SHE SAID, "HIS WHOLE LIFE WAS DESIGNED TO EITHER CARE FOR PEOPLE OR TO INSPIRE PEOPLE."

WE'VE HEARD TODAY EXAMPLES OF THE WAYS HE CARED BACK THEN. BUT ERIC LIDDELL CONTINUES TO INSPIRE TODAY. HOW DOES HE DO THAT?

IT WOULD HELP FIRST TO UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PURPOSE AND CALLING, WHICH ARE OFTEN INTERCHANGED. PURPOSE IS WHAT GOD DESIGNED US TO DO – OUR INNATE TALENTS AND SKILLS. CALLING IS WHERE WE ARE CALLED TO USE THOSE GIFTS.

AT A MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR ERIC IN SCOTLAND, A FRIEND, QUOTING MATTHEW 5:16, SAID THAT ERIC LET HIS LIGHT SHINE FOR THE GLORY OF GOD.

IF WE THINK OF THAT AS ERIC'S PURPOSE – TO BE LIGHT – THEN HIS CALLING WOULD BE TWO-FOLD: FIRST, CALLED TO BE LIGHT IN THE WORLD OF COMPETITIVE SPORTS, THEN SECOND, CALLED TO BE LIGHT TO HURTING SOULS IN CHINA.

THE MOST QUOTED LINE FROM THE MOVIE CAPTURES THAT IDEA WELL. ERIC TELLS HIS SISTER JENNY, "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."

CALLED TO BE LIGHT ON THE TRACK AND IN CHINA – NOW WITH THAT AS BACKGROUND, WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ERIC AND HIS STORY?

---

IN SCOTLAND, THE CHARITY NAMED AFTER ERIC, CALLED **THE ERIC LIDDELL COMMUNITY**, CELEBRATED THE 100<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY IN 2024 OF ERIC WINNING THE GOLD MEDAL WITH A CAMPAIGN PROMOTING VALUES HE INSPIRED. THOSE THREE VALUES – **PASSION**, **COMPASSION**, AND **INTEGRITY** – ARE WHAT WE CAN TAKE AWAY TODAY.

**PASSION** MEANS A DEDICATION TO YOUR PURPOSE AND TO YOUR CALLING. IT SHOULD PROMPT US TO EXPLORE THE QUESTIONS, "WHAT HAS GOD DESIGNED ME TO DO?" AND "WHERE IS HE CALLING ME TO DO THAT?" BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY, HAVING PASSION MEANS PUTTING GOD FIRST, HONORING HIM WITH ALL

YOUR HEART, SOUL, MIND, AND STRENGTH, AS ERIC DID, WHICH WAS JESUS' FIRST COMMAND.

**COMPASSION** MEANS SELFLESSNESS AND RESPECT. ERIC TRULY CARED ABOUT PEOPLE OUTSIDE OF THE CIRCLE IN WHICH HE LITERALLY RAN. HE TOOK JESUS' SECOND COMMAND TO "LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF" SERIOUSLY, AS SHOULD WE.

**INTEGRITY** MEANS LOYALTY AND SELF-SACRIFICE. STANDING FIRM IN YOUR BELIEFS. BEING TRUE TO YOUR WORD AND TO OTHERS. AND, WHEN NECESSARY, DOING THE HARD THINGS, EVEN IF IT MEANS GIVING UP WHAT THE WORLD THINKS IS SUCCESS IN ORDER TO MAKE IT A BETTER PLACE.

---

WHY DID ERIC'S LIFE END AS EARLY AS IT DID? WE REALLY WON'T KNOW THIS SIDE OF HEAVEN, THOUGH WE CAN AGREE THAT HE CONTINUES TO INSPIRE, AND TO SHOW US WHAT LIVING A CHRISTIAN LIFE CAN LOOK LIKE ... SOMETHING HE LEARNED FROM ONE WHOSE LIFE, FROM OUR PERSPECTIVE, ALSO WAS CUT SHORT. HE WAS ONLY 33 YEARS OLD.

**CHRIST** HAD A PURPOSE. HE SAID, "I COME THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE, AND THAT THEY MAY HAVE IT MORE ABUNDANTLY (JOHN 10:10). HE WAS CALLED TO EARTH TO MODEL THAT FOR US.

ERIC LIDDELL PAID ATTENTION. AND HE RAN A LOT OF RACES, ONE ENDING WITH A GOLD MEDAL AROUND HIS NECK. BUT IN THE END, AFTER A LIFE OF BOTH HONORS AND HARDSHIPS, HE EARNED AN EVEN GREATER REWARD, AND COULD SAY, LIKE THE APOSTLE PAUL, "I HAVE FOUGHT THE GOOD FIGHT, I HAVE FINISHED THE RACE, I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH."

HIS EXAMPLE CAN ENCOURAGE US TO DO THE SAME.