

***Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas***  
***Fredericksburg Bible Church***

*107 East Austin*

*Fredericksburg, Texas 78624*

*830-997-8834    [jthomas@fbgbible.org](mailto:jthomas@fbgbible.org)*

**A1229 – July 15, 2012 – 1 Corinthians 9:24-27**  
**Running The Race To Win**

If you'd open your Bible to 1 Cor 9 we'll continue with the central principle of 1 Cor 8, 9 and 10; forfeiting your rights for the sake of others and move into the importance of self-discipline for rewards.

Paul has illustrated in chapter 9:1-15 the principle of forfeiting rights; he forfeited his apostolic rights of financial support so he could continue to boast in his preaching the gospel without charge, which results in rewards.

Further, in vv 16-23 Paul says he forfeited his rights as a Christian so as not to offend Jews, those under the Law and those without the Law, so as to save some, and we saw examples of that in the Book of Acts.

Let's pick up in verse 20 because we want to cover a couple of elements we didn't have time to deal with last week. "To the Jews I became as a Jew so that I might win Jews;" meaning I followed cultural customs of Jews for the sake of their salvation, "to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not myself under the law, so that I might with those who are under the Law;" meaning those who put themselves under the Law of Moses like Gentile proselytes to Judaism or Gentile God-fearers, to those Paul put himself under the Law of Moses for their sake, however, importantly he states, that he himself is not under the Law. Paul knew that the Law of Moses was fulfilled in Messiah and no believer was under the Law of Moses. But for the salvation of those who had put themselves under the Law he put himself under the Law. We saw him take vows, attend Jewish feasts and even have Timothy circumcised. All this was done merely for evangelistic purposes and not for justification or sanctification. In verse 21 Paul says, I became "to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law." -meaning Gentiles who were outside the confines of the

Law of Moses, Paul would acclimate to their behavior for evangelistic purposes, but here, he is very careful to state that he himself is not lawless, he is under the Law of Christ.

So two qualifications have to be made. On one hand in verse 20 Paul says he is *not* under the Law of Moses, on the other hand in verse 21 Paul says this does not mean he is without Law, he is under the Law of Messiah. So then we find that the Law of Moses was the standard of living for OT Israel, the death of Christ fulfilled the Law of Moses; the new standard of living for the NT Church is the Law of Messiah. What this means is we are not under any of the Laws of Moses. We are not under even one of the Ten Commandments. The entire Law of Moses was fulfilled by Christ. Therefore we cannot be under any of it. However, this does not mean we are without the Law of God, we are indeed under the Law of Messiah.

Now when both laws are looked at you will find that many of the laws in the Law of Christ are identical to laws in the Law of Moses. For example, theft and lying and coveting and murder are all wrong under the Law of Moses and the Law of Messiah. However, when we murder we are not breaking one of the Ten Commandments in the Law of Moses, we are breaking one of the laws in the Law of Messiah. What I am trying to show is that the Law of Moses and the Law of Messiah are two distinct systems of Law and you cannot be under both of them, you can only be under one or the other. And we are under the Law of Messiah because He fulfilled the Law of Moses. Rom 10:4, "For Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes." But this does not make us without Law, we are now under the system of law called the Law of Messiah. Let me illustrate by using the example of a driver's license.

If I live in Texas, which thank God I do, when I drive in Texas I am subject to the traffic laws of the state of Texas. If I am pulled over for speeding then I get a ticket for breaking the traffic laws of the state of Texas. If I move to California, which I pray God I don't have to, when I drive in California I am subject to the traffic laws of the state of California. Many of the traffic laws in California are the same as those in the state of Texas. Both states prohibit speeding. However, if I am pulled over in California for speeding and given a ticket, I do not receive a ticket because I broke the traffic laws of the state of Texas. I receive a ticket because I broke a traffic law in the state of

California. So then you see that while Texas traffic laws and California traffic laws may have many similarities, they are two distinct systems of traffic laws. And Texas law has no authority over me when I am driving in California and vice versa. So it is with the Law of Moses and the Law of Messiah. Even if you murder you do not break a commandment of the Law of Moses, it is not even be possible to break any of the Ten Commandments today because nobody is under the Law of Moses. However, you would be breaking a Law of Messiah.

Now you might not see how extremely important this distinction is, but think of it this way - to truly be under a system of law requires that when you break the law the penalty defined by that law is exacted. For example, if I committed adultery under the Law of Moses then the penalty for adultery in the Law of Moses was death by stoning. However, it is obvious that if I commit adultery today I am not under that penalty. So again, I am not under the Law of Moses because if I were I would be under the penalties of the Law of Moses. So then, just as Paul says in verse 20, I am not myself under the Law of Moses. The reason being that Law was completely fulfilled in Christ.

However, as a Christian that does not mean I am without law, I am not without the law of God but am under the system of law called the Law of Messiah. Under this system if I commit adultery then the penalty defined by that law is stunted growth as a Christian, loss of enjoyment of life and loss of rewards at the judgment seat of Christ. So then I am under the Law of Messiah and the penalties for breaking the Law of Messiah. Just as Paul says in verse 21, I am not without the law of God but under the law of Messiah.

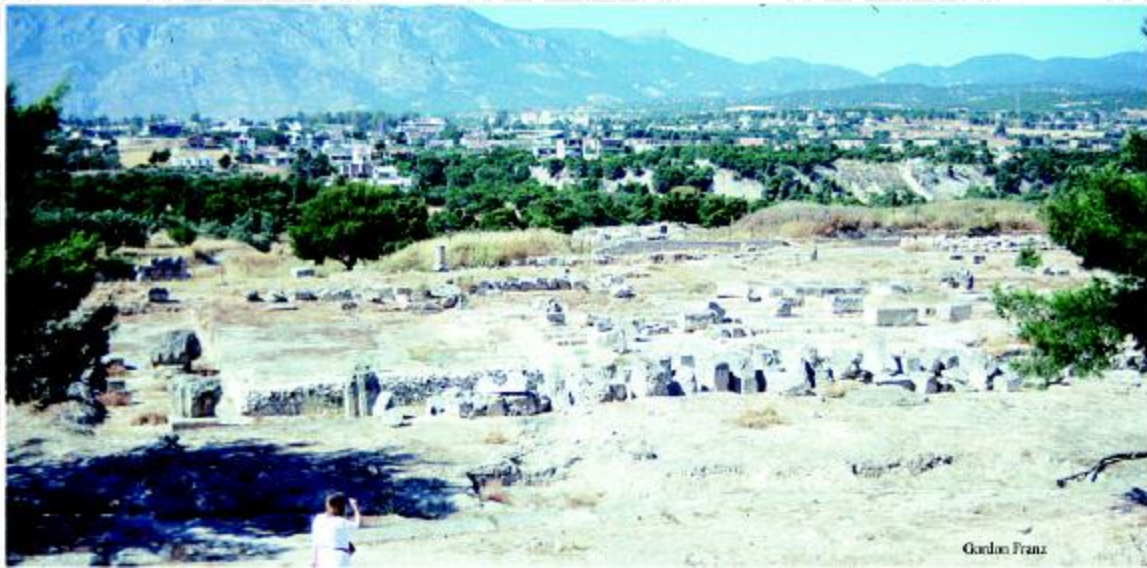
Now, as a Christian who is not under the Law of Moses, I nevertheless have the right to keep parts of the Law of Moses if I want to. That's what Paul did for evangelistic purposes. Paul says to the Jew I became as a Jew and to those under Law as under Law that I might win some. So Paul acted strangely at times but he did it for the salvation of others.

Now this takes discipline because you're giving up a lot of freedom to keep the Law of Moses. The Law was very rigorous. We saw Paul last week take vows, get his head shaved, pay the expenses for four other men under a vow, get purified, and offer sacrifices. All of this was unnecessary for Paul and extremely expensive but he nevertheless forfeited his freedoms so as not to

offend so that he might save some. It's the principle of verse 23, "I do all things for the sake of the gospel." At this point the analogy with an athlete begins to come into focus. Just as Paul would sacrifice all things for the sake of winning some to Christ, so an athlete will do all things for the sake of winning the prize!

So let's think about the analogy with athletics. The 2012 Summer Olympics are right around the corner. And if you watch the Olympics you are going to hear some amazing stories about how various athletes overcame tremendous obstacles, how they endured tremendous hardships, how they sacrificed everything to make their Olympic team and go on to win the gold medal. And I encourage you to pay attention to some of these stories as analogies to the Christian life. Paul sums it up in 1 Tim 4:8, "bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the *life* to come." So there are great parallels between athletics and the Christian life; the hard work, the injuries, the endurance, the discipline, the mental focus and agility are all important life lessons that can be translated over to the spiritual life. And that is what Paul is doing in 9:24-27.

Now the Corinthians were well aware of the Games and the training an athlete had to undergo in order to compete in the games and win the prize. There were four major athletic festivals in ancient Greece known as the "circuit". They included the Pythian Games at Delphi honoring Apollo, the god of healing, music, poetry and prophecy; the games at Nemea honoring Zeus, the god of the heavens; the oldest of all, the Olympic Games at Olympia also honoring Zeus; and finally the Isthmian Games at Corinth honoring Poseidon, the god of the sea. And here you see the ruins of the temple.



**Ruins of the Temple of Poseidon at Isthmia.** The most prominent building at Isthmia was the temple of Poseidon, god of the sea (Roman Neptune), in whose honor the biennial Isthmian Games were held.

Many think these games played a prominent role in Paul choosing Corinth as his destination after leaving Athens because in the year of his visit, AD51, the Isthmian Games were held.

At that time all Greece would have converged on Corinth giving Paul ample opportunity to preach the gospel. At these games the athletes would compete in foot racing, wrestling, boxing, long jumping, discus throwing, javelin hurling, chariot racing, poetry reading and singing. I bet you didn't know poetry reading and singing were sports! According to inscriptions contemporary with the Apostle Paul, women as well as men competed in these games.<sup>1</sup> Before the competition the athlete would enter a small structure called the Palaimon, situated near the temple of Poseidon.



**Remains of the Palaimon**, a small structure located near the Poseidon Temple at Isthmia. This is where the athletes took an oath to “play by the rules.” Paul might have had this in mind when he penned 2 Timothy 2:5.

Within this structure, the athlete would take an oath to abide by the rules of the games. If they broke the oath, they were disqualified from the Games. If they kept the oath and won the race then on the last day of the Games they would be rewarded with a crown of wild celery.<sup>ii</sup>



A funerary monument from Isthmia depicting the various crowns won by the athlete buried here.

These aspects of the Games stand behind 1 Cor 9:24-27 and would have been clearly understood by every Corinthian. So when Paul says in verse 24, **Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize?** Of course they all knew (cf 5:6; 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19; 9:13 for the “do you not know” statements in Paul’s letter.) Notice, however, in their games, while all who qualified ran in the race, **only** how many won the prize? **Only one received the prize.** They didn’t have first, second and third place, no gold, silver and bronze medals, you either won or you lost. Therefore Paul says, **Run in such a way that you may win.** By parallel all Christians run the race but not all win the prize. There are winners and

losers in the Christian life. You either receive rewards or you do not receive rewards. Paul says we ought to learn the lesson from the foot races and boxing matches and compete so as to win the reward.

Now with that said the command to so as to win, let me ask you straightly. “Is it wrong to want rewards? Is it wrong to live obediently in order to receive rewards?” To do it for the prize?” If it’s not I don’t know what you do with this verse. Frankly, I don’t know what you do with a lot of verses. Are rewards put forward as a proper motive to live the Christian life? Observe 1 Peter 5:2, “shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; <sup>3</sup>nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup>And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” Is the crown of glory not laid out as a motive to elders to shepherd the flock of God? Or consider James 1:12, “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which *the Lord* has promised to those who love Him.” Is the crown of life not laid out as a motivation to persevere under trial to the very end? Or consider the promise to the Smyrnan’s in Rev 2:10, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Is the crown of life not promised specifically to motivate them to be faithful until death? Or the promise to the Philadelphians in Rev 3:11, “hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown.” Is this danger of losing your crown not a motive to hold fast to what you have? Over and over rewards are set forth as a motive to continue persevering in the Christian life. If such passages still trouble you, you’re not the first. John Frame says, “I confess that I was surprised by the number of times Scripture uses rewards to motivate obedience. Like many of us, I tend toward the Kantian notion that we should simply do our duty for duty’s sake *and never think about reward*. But that notion is quite unbiblical. If God takes the trouble...to urge our obedience by a promise of reward, we should embrace that promise with thanks, not despise it.”

And not only is striving to win rewards biblical but it also fits the natural human condition, which is a desire to win. I know of no human being who trains to compete in the Olympic Games in order to lose. Why the very motive to keep training is to win the prize! I know of no student who studies hard in



order to finish last in his class. Why the very motive to keep studying is to finish first! And as Christians we are called to finish in first place as well!

Paul clearly was running the race in order to win the prize. Turn to Phil 3:14. Starting in verse 12, “Not that I have already obtained *it*” referring to the resurrection, “or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. <sup>13</sup>Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing *I do*: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Friend, Paul kept running forward in order to win the prize, if he were to look into his past he would fall apart; he arrested Christians, he murdered Stephen, and if he were to live back there in guilt he would never have moved an inch in the Christian life! He said forget what is back there, I can’t change that at all, I’ve got to look forward and press on toward the goal to win the prize!

Did Paul press on? Did Paul win the prize? Turn to 2 Tim 4:7. Paul was about to be executed. He was in prison under Nero. He knew his time of departure was near. Verse 6, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. <sup>7</sup>I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;” “The words in Greek have a more distinctly athletic flavor. To bring this out the passage might be rendered: “I have competed in the good athletic games; I have finished the foot race, I have kept the pledge (i.e. to compete honestly, with reference to the athletic oath). What remains to me is to receive the crown of righteousness, which has been put aside for me; it will be awarded to me by the Lord, the just umpire, on that day” (an allusion to the last day of the games when, presumably, the prizes were handed out to the winners) (Broneer 1962:31, footnote 23).” Paul ran the race and he ran it to win the prize.

And not only did Paul show us that we should run in order to win the prize but the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is put forward as the example to follow in running the race. Turn to Hebrews 12:1. Right on the front of our bulletin it says “fixing your eyes on Jesus.” The context of that is He is what you look at when you run the Christian race; He is the example to follow. Verse 1, “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>fixing our eyes

on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross,” Why did Jesus Christ endure the cross? For the reward of joy on the other side! “despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup>For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” If Jesus Christ endured the cross for the joy set before Him, is it not proper to endure the grueling Christian race for the prize? He becomes the archetype of running the Christian race. He becomes the archetype of overcoming obstacles, of enduring mocking, of persevering through shame. But on the other side of the cross was joy incomparable. He knew that and He endured it for that. And on the other side of the Christian life are rewards incomprehensible. God reveals that so we will endure for that. So fix your eyes on Jesus and run, and keep running and do not grow weary and lose heart, there are rewards incomparable on the other side!

Now returning to 1 Cor 9:24 and before we leave the verse let me make sure I am clear about who we are competing against in this race. Clearly we are not competing against one another for rewards. Our opponents are not fellow Christians but the world, the flesh and the devil. They do not want us to strive for rewards because then we would be serious, disciplined, well-trained Christians. Put in that light, should we not want to defeat the world, the flesh and the devil? Surely they want to defeat you! So in conclusion to verse 24, we should think of the Christian life as a race to be run and we ought to run it in order to win.

But how do we do that? How do we win the prize? In the same way an athlete wins the prize? Self-discipline in all things spiritual, verse 25, **Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things.** At the times of the Isthmian Games competitors had to train for 10 months and sign a pledge that they had trained for at least 10 months. Today athletes train much longer, years and years of training are involved in preparing for the Olympic Games. The word **self-control** refers to whatever disciplinary measures an athlete would take in order to reach his peak performance on the day of competition. You’ve got to be dedicated, you’ve got to eat a strict diet, train daily with weights and in the field, you’ve got to study proper technique and practice that technique, it takes tremendous dedication and mental focus to be the very best you can be. And the parallel is true for the Christian life. It takes dedication, it takes strict study of the word of God, it

takes daily training in how to use the word of God, it takes proper study techniques, and it takes mental focus and self-discipline. Just like the apostle Paul said to Timothy, “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness,” (1 Tim 4:7). Godliness takes discipline, it doesn’t just happen, it doesn’t happen overnight, it takes years and years of discipline and study.

Now as for those who compete in athletics Paul says middle of verse 25, **They do it to receive a perishable wreath.** The victors would receive a crown of wild celery like the ones I showed you earlier. Within a few hours these celery crowns would wither. So Paul says, **but we** do it for **an imperishable crown**, a *stephanos* crown, a victor’s crown, a reward which can never be destroyed. Put in that light, how much more valuable are rewards given at the judgment seat of Christ than winning a gold medal at the Olympic Games, how much more valuable a reward given at the judgment seat of Christ than a gold ring at the Super Bowl, how much more valuable than winning the Stanley Cup or the World Cup or the NBA Championship or winning the World Series or any of the world’s major sporting events. All of these awards will perish, but the crown you receive at the judgment seat of Christ will never perish, it is incorruptible and therefore so far superior to any award you can receive in this life.

Realizing the value, how then should we run so as to win this reward? Paul says in 1 Cor 9:26, **Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air;** Paul went straight for the prize. Everything in his life was aimed at winning the prize. He would let no thing and no one distract him from the sole goal of winning the prize.

9:27, **but I discipline my body and make it my slave**, the point being Paul exercised self-discipline, he trained hard, he was dedicated to performing excellently as a Christian. Why? **so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.** In other words, so that he would win the reward, he did not want to lose the reward. In conclusion let me show you a few passages that show how important it is to persevere to the end so you don’t lose rewards. The first passage is 2 John 8. And I’ll be reading this from the KJV because it more accurately reflects the proper reading. “Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but *that* we may receive a full reward.” John clearly held that if his converts

did not stay on the truth track this would affect his rewards. And clearly John wanted to receive his rewards.

The second passage is Rev 3:11. The great Philadelphian Christians, the only good church of the seven in Christ's estimation. He says in verse 11, 'I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown.'" Clearly they could lose their crown. They already had earned rewards but those rewards could be lost if they didn't persevere to the end. Therefore Christ's instruction to them is to hold on tight to what they had already had.

The third passage is Col 2:18. "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind," those who turn believers aside from being occupied with Christ defraud them of rewards. So then if you have people in your life that turn you aside from Christ, you shouldn't let them get in the way, you should get them out of the way, they are an obstacle.

The fourth passage is 1 Cor 3:10, the fullest passage on rewards in the NT. The prospect is left out that you may lose all rewards. Verse 10, "According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. <sup>11</sup>For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Alright, Christ is the foundation. All believers have that foundation. The issue is not laying the foundation. The issue is how you build on that foundation. What materials you use in constructing on that foundation, whether they are of the Spirit or of the flesh. Verse 12, "Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, <sup>13</sup>each man's work will become evident;" there are six materials there, but two categories, the first three are high quality, gold, silver and precious stones, those are of the Spirit; the last three are low quality; wood, hay and straw, those are of the flesh. All your works are one or the other, in the day of judgment it'll show up because, verse 13, "the day will show it because it is *to be* revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. <sup>14</sup>If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup>If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." So you can lose rewards but you can't lose salvation. It says a believer can "suffer loss" at the

judgment seat of Christ. That doesn't sound too fun. That sounds somewhat distressing. I want to take you to another passage like this but my point here is it's not going to be a day when everybody smiles. It is a judgment, not of salvation, but hey, a judgment nonetheless.

Take a look at 1 John 2:28. 1 John is the great book on abiding or not abiding in Him. In 2:28 he gives a reason we should abide in Him, "Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming." You can only conclude that if you're not abiding when he appears then you will shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. The passive voice "shrink away in shame" suggests a shrinking away from Christ due to a sense of failure to live up to all the capacity He gave you. The sense of shame is produced by the believer and not by Christ shaming the believer.

Finally, what will we do with our crowns? Paul doesn't address this in our passage but I think it is helpful to consider why Christ gives us crowns. Turn to Rev 4:10-11. Verse 10, "the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, <sup>11</sup>"Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created." If the twenty-four elders represent the church, at least in part, which I think they do, then we will take our crowns and cast them at the Savior's feet. In other words, rewards are not for selfish use. They are for the use of our Savior and His glory. And the more rewards we have the greater our ability to glorify Him forever and ever. So why would we not want to have them? When we realize they enable us to glorify Him in greater and greater ways forevermore then it becomes quite natural to want them, and quite godly.

We should want rewards, it is a proper Christian motive, we should discipline ourselves in order to win rewards, and it is a proper Christian goal. You know what this passage is all about. This passage is about self-discipline, disciplining yourself to godliness as an athlete disciplines himself to excellence. And I think part of the problem is we're lazy and we want to stay lazy. Another part of the problem is the new ethic that everyone is a winner and there are no losers. And I'm sorry but that is a pagan ethic, it is evil, it is destructive of self-discipline, it is destructive of character-building, it is

destructive of strong training. Everyone is not a winner. There are winners and losers in this life and there are winners and losers in the Christian life. And children need to learn early on how to win and how to lose and that there are winners and there are losers because when they get out in the real world, that's the way it is! Let me share one short story about the importance of being beaten and what it can do for you. Many of you may know arguably the greatest basketball player ever, Michael Jordan. What you may not know is that he was cut from his High School varsity team as a tenth grader. Years later he said, "I think that not making the Varsity team drove me to really work at my game, and also taught me that if you set goals, and work hard to achieve them-the hard work can pay off."<sup>iii</sup> Nobody ever became anybody by having an easy time of it. You've got to go through pain, you've got to go through sacrifice, you've got to go through loss in order to learn how to get back up, how to work harder and how to persevere to the end!

In conclusion, the main idea is that we should not spurn rewards as a motive to godly living. But I suspect that the reason most Christians openly despise rewards as a motive to godly living is because secretly they are lazy, they do not want to exercise the self-discipline that is necessary to godliness. But my prayer is that we get our doctrine on this matter from the Holy Spirit and not our human flesh.

---

<sup>i</sup> Associates for Biblical Research. (2004; 2006). *Vol. 17: Bible and Spade (2004) Volume 17 (2) (57)*. Associates for Biblical Research.

<sup>ii</sup> Associates for Biblical Research. (1973; 2005). *Vol. 2: Bible and Spade (1973) Volume 2 (4) (98–100)*. Associates for Biblical Research.

<sup>iii</sup>

[http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What\\_year\\_did\\_Michael\\_Jordan\\_not\\_make\\_his\\_basketball\\_team\\_in\\_high\\_school](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_year_did_Michael_Jordan_not_make_his_basketball_team_in_high_school)

[Back To The Top](#)

Copyright (c) Fredericksburg Bible Church 2012