



GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING

Free to Run **Galatians 5:7-12**

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You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?
⁸This persuasion is not from him who calls you. ⁹A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. ¹¹But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹²I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

Introduction

In high school, I played soccer. On the whole, I loved it. But I must admit I always dreaded tryouts, particularly the first day. Because tryouts always began the same way: with the one mile run in under 6 minutes. By the end of the season, that was no problem. But at the beginning of the season, after a summer of lollygagging around, I always found it a grueling experience.

I was in particularly lousy shape going into my senior year. So I decided my only hope of finishing well—and convincing the coaches that I was in good shape—was to get off to a fast start, and then pray like mad that the momentum of those behind me would carry me the rest of the way.

In effect, I was trying to rely on the great cloud of witnesses, not to encourage me, but to keep nipping at my heels so I'd keep going. Yes, it was a gamble, because what would happen if I couldn't keep up the pace or finish well?

So, that's what I did: whistle blew and I bolted out in front of the rest. Lap one. Then, lap two, still out in front. Lap three, I was feeling a bit sluggish. Lap three-and-a-half, people began passing me. Lap four, lots of people were passing me!

By the time I'd crossed the finish line, I was at the back of the entire pack. And despite being one of the stronger players, that nearly got me cut from the team my senior year.

That humbling experience taught me the hard lesson that you can start a race well, yet not finish it well. You can bluff yourself through a few opening laps, but if you're not really in good shape, you're not going to sustain the race to the finish line.

Did you know that this sometimes happens to professing Christians? They get off to a good start, yet they don't finish strong; sometimes they don't finish at all. Jesus described these folks this way: "receive with joy, yet fall away; no root, no endurance."

Paul's is worried this is what's happening to the Galatians. "You were running well," he says (5:7). "Who hindered you from obeying the truth?" (5:7-8). They'd gotten off to a good start, but something had gone terribly wrong. They'd stopped running the race; or at least they weren't running well, running strong, running to finish the race.

Perhaps that's where some of you are today. When you first heard the gospel, you embraced it with great joy—you got off to a great start in the Christian life. But over time, as the race continued, you found yourself running out of gas; or something or someone has gotten in your path and is hindering you, making it more difficult for you to run the race set before you with endurance.

The Christian Life is a Race

You see, the Christian life is a race. It has a beginning and an end. There's also a path you run on and a prize you can win. The beginning is conversion. The end is, of course, the finish line, which is the Final Judgment, when those who successfully cross that line will hear from the Judge: "Well done, good and faithful runner!" And the prize? Well, that's nothing less than eternal life itself, what the Bible refers to as the "crown of life" held out for those who endure all the way to the end (James 1:12).

But how about the path on which you run? That's the gospel. What God has done in Christ Jesus to free sinners from their bondage to sin—this is the track upon which you run and the lines within which you run. The Christian life, then, is a gospel-race; or as John Bunyan says in his classic allegory on the Christian life, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, this is the "race of saints in this our Gospel-day."

Yet how about actually running the race? What does it mean to run this race? Here's perhaps a surprise for some of you: you run the race by *obeying the truth* of the gospel (5:8). The truth of the gospel is the track; obedience to it—which includes faith in it (cf. 5:6)—is running.

If you're going to finish, you must be free (5:9, 12).

But, listen, if you're going to finish the race, you must be free. Through the gospel, God can set you free to run the race: "For freedom Christ has set us free" (5:1). Yet, the truth is we have a way of letting hindrances back into our lives; and these hindrances then jeopardized our freedom and compromise our ability to finish the race.

Imagine trying to run the Boston Marathon with a suitcase in one hand, a duffle bag in the other, and a sixty-pound backpack slung over your shoulders. You'd never finish; those weights would drag you to the ground and make it impossible to run. That's what unaddressed sin in our lives is like; it undermines our ability to run the race set before us. Thus, we need to lay aside these weights: the love of money, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life, covetousness, an unforgiving spirit.

Hindrances can undermine your race altogether. Some are caused by our own sin. Believers are challenged to "lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely" in order to "run with endurance the race set before us" (Heb. 12:1).

But the Bible says, not only our own sin, but *other people* can actually hinder us from running the race. This is what's happened to the Galatians. Some have stepped onto the track and are troubling the Galatians, boxing them in, causing them to veer away from their original obedience to the truth.

Paul recognizes that the Galatians have been knocked off course by others. What's come over them isn't from God. God never undercuts his own runners; he never hinders you from running the race. He may make your course more difficult: steep inclines, unexpected twists or turns. But God is not the one who causes you to lose heart or stop running. Paul reminded the Galatians: "This persuasion is not from him who calls you" (v. 8).

Instead, it's from a small group of people within the church who are corrupting the whole. They've boxed the Galatians in and are disrupting their race, hindering them from finish well.

At the 1938 NCAA Championships in Minneapolis, Louie Zamperini was the man to beat. Coaches from rival schools had even ordered their runners to sharpen the spikes on their shoes and slash Louie. "Halfway through the race, just as Louie was about to move ahead for the lead, several runners shouldered around him, boxing him in. Louie tried repeatedly to break loose, but he couldn't get around the other men. Suddenly, the man beside him swerved in and stomped on his foot, impaling Louie's toe with his spike. A moment later, the man ahead began kicking backward, cutting both of Louie's shins. A third man elbowed Louie's chest so hard that he cracked Louie's rib."¹

This is what the Agitators were doing to the Galatians. They had gotten onto the track and surrounded the Galatians; they had boxed them in. They were stomping on their feet, slashing at their shins, even elbowing them in the chest, perhaps breaking a few ribs. And Paul, at least, recognizes that there's no way the Galatians are going to finish the race set before them if they don't break free of the Agitators' influence. But the only way they're going to break free is by removing this hindrance from their own midst.

That's why Paul quotes the proverb, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (v. 9). Not only does he want the Galatians to realize the source of their defection; he also wants to them to take bold action to deal with it. And bold action is what that proverb implies. Paul uses this proverb on only one other occasion, and there the point is clear. "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened" (1 Cor. 5:6-7). So desirous, in fact, is Paul that he finally simply wishes they'd disqualify themselves: "I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!" (v. 12).

Some of you need to lay aside a few weights; you're carrying around some heavy bags. You're having difficulty running the Christian race because unaddressed sin in your life and it's easily entangling you. If you feel a lack of energy and vitality, it may well be because you're struggling to run under the undue weight of unaddressed sin.

Others may have a certain individual in your life who's hindering your obedience to the truth. You need to remember that a little leaven leavens the whole lump; what's true of

¹ Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (New York: Random House, 2011), p. 41.

churches is also true for individual Christians. A little bad influence can do big damage on your ability to run the race. You need to put some distance between you and that person; you need to have a blunt conversation with him or her; you may even need to part ways to avoid being weighed down any further by that person's influence.

But Even When You're Free, It Still Won't Be Easy (5:11).

As you lay aside unnecessary weights and remove the hindrances in your way, you'll find yourself running faster and faster and faster, with greater and greater strength and confidence.

But, listen, don't think this means the challenges to finishing the race will all disappear. They won't. In fact, what you often find is that the faster and faster you run, the more and more pushback you'll receive.

No one ran faster, or with greater abandonment and focus, than the Apostle Paul. "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).

At the same time, no one experienced more pushback than Paul. And he reminds the Galatians of this very thing: "But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed" (v. 11). It's as if Paul is saying to them: even when you're free to run, as I am, it still won't be easy. Even when the hindrances are removed from your own life or from within the church, you'll still face hostility from outsiders. Even if you're not running with unnecessary weights, and even if others aren't cutting in on you and blocking your way, you'll nevertheless have the jeering of the crowds to contend with.

The pushback, Paul says, is never going away. That is, if you're faithful to the gospel and the cross of Christ. The only way to remove all pushback is to stop obeying the gospel. Paul knows if he only removes the offense of cross of Christ, he can stop all pushback against him. But if he does that, he destroys the gospel—and he will destroy his own soul, having run and labored in vain.

Yet As You Run The Race, Rest Confidently In The Lord (5:10)

But this shouldn't cause us to fret or worry or lose hope or quit before we've gone too far. Nor should this undermine our assurance or our confidence, neither toward ourselves nor toward others. Instead, a biblical perspective on the Christian life as a race would suggest this: *As you run the race, rest confidently in the Lord.* "I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine" (v. 10).

God is able to sustain you all the way to the end. He is able to pour grace into your heart in such a way that you remain steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, even to your last breath. God is also able to deal with those who might want to keep you from finishing the race; this is also a part of Paul's confidence in the Lord about the Galatians: "the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is" (v. 10). Evidently, Paul's not even sure who all is responsible God for the chaos that's erupted in Galatia, but he's nevertheless completely confident that God know who's responsible—and He will most assuredly deal with that person.

Left to ourselves, we would be without hope of ever finish the race. Apart from the grace of God, who could successfully complete the Christian life? Yet, with a strong belief in the grace of God, we can rest confidently in the Lord—even as with run the race set before us with all endurance. And even when the setbacks come, or we stumble along the way, we can still rest confidently in the Lord, knowing this: “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). Or, as Paul says to the Corinthians, “our Lord Jesus Christ . . . will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:8-9). “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thess. 5:24).

Listen, friends, very careful to what I’m about to say: You can start well, yet not finish well. But you won’t. You *can*, but you *won’t*. Left to yourself, you not only can, but most certainly would. However, because of the grace of God, you won’t because God himself has pledged to keep you.

Confident runners are unhurried even when they’re running at a lightning-fast pace. This has been true of the great Olympic sprinters; when you watch the race in slow-motion, they sometimes don’t even look like they’re trying. They’ve got poise; there’s a coolness to the look on their face; they don’t look worried, much less anxious. This is a picture of how a Christian can run the race with endurance, yet rest confidently in the Lord.

Running the Race, Looking To Jesus

So, then, learn to rest in the grace of God as it works powerfully within you to cause you to run the race with endurance to the end. Learn to say with the Apostle Paul: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (1 Cor. 15:10).

If you’re struggling to run well, then lean all the more on the God “who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). If you’ve taken a stumble and are struggling to return to your feet, then cry out to “the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, [and who] will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (1 Pet. 5:10-11); and cry out to other runners who can come alongside you to encourage every day, as long as it is called today, so that you can keep running the race.

But what if you’ve stopped running altogether? Consider the prize you’re forfeiting: “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10). And may the sheer prospect of losing the reward of eternal life with God cause you to repentant, return to the Lord and return to the track of the gospel and the Christian life, and “while the promise of entering [God’s] rest still stands,” cause you to “fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it” (Heb. 4:1).

Finally, run the race by looking to Jesus. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, *looking to Jesus*, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The Lord Jesus Christ has already run his race, all the way across the finish line. And now, having finished his race, Jesus Christ is “crowned with glory and honor” (Heb. 2:9). And he is coming again, conquering and to conquer (Rev. 6:2). And we who want to finish the race set before us must therefore fix our gaze upon him who has gone before us.

Looking to Jesus is, then, the key to finishing the race set before you. Jesus is the source of our freedom to run free; he is the model of what it means to finish the race well; he is the focus of our gaze as we make our way through this life; he is the source of motivation because he holds out to us the prize, the crown of life; and he is the one who can work in us that which is pleasing in his sight—the intentionality, endurance, and exertion we need to complete the race.

Then, by the grace of God and all because of Jesus, we will be able one day to say with the Apostle Paul: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8).

Amen.

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