

Running the Christian race

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 9. I'm reading again at verse 34, 24, sorry.

1 Corinthians 9 verse 24. Know ye not that they which run in our race run all, but one receiveth the prize.

So run that ye may obtain. There is not anything around us from which we may not draw some hints for our spiritual instruction.

I read once of an illustration given by one of the Puritans.

He was describing the Christian life and in particular the last phases of a Christian's life. And he was saying that some Christians, so far as their experience is concerned, may be likened to a sailing ship making for port.

[1 : 25] The wind behind, the sea relatively calm, no obstacles in the way, and she makes a straight course into harbour.

So are some Christians, so far as their experience is concerned. They go into glory as it were, on the crest of a wave, of a sense of God's love for themselves.

But other Christians are different. And this Puritan gentleman likened the course of some others to a sailing ship making for port, the wind against her, in the sea very, very rough.

And she had to tack this way and tack the other way constantly. But her aim was to get into port and she was battling so much against the elements that some abode were ready to conclude that they would never make it.

Eventually, she did make it and tied up safely as the other one. Now I just mention these two illustrations because it is legitimate for us to use things that are readily identifiable in the world about us to illustrate spiritual realities.

[3 : 01] In this island itself, and I am sure they took their line from the scriptures and Paul here speaks of it, of ploughing.

At the work of the Holy Spirit really can be likened to a plough turning the earth. Now maybe some of the younger ones haven't, have never seen that kind of thing, but many present I am sure have. And that is the kind of illustration used many times to illustrate the work of the Spirit of God in the life of men.

And what the Spirit of God does is turn your whole world upside down. The things that were near and dear to you and for which you lived in your life of sin and carelessness really are turned to the bottom of the pile as it were.

And things for which you cared little or nothing come to have the most significance. And we see that Paul here and elsewhere uses illustrations from the culture in which he found himself to illustrate spiritual things.

[4 : 16] If you remember what he writes to Timothy, 2 Timothy chapter 4 he says, I have fought a good fight. I have run the race and so on.

He is talking in particular about something which those to whom he was writing they were very familiar with that. They were familiar with these Greek games that were attended by so many people.

And these people to whom he wrote would understand right away what Paul was saying I have run the race. I have fought a good fight. And we see here also he alludes to the same kind of thing.

In the verse we have taken as a text. They which run in a race run all but one receiveth the prize.

So run that ye may obtain.

It's as if he is directing his spiritual message to them in terms with which they are familiar in their culture.

[5 : 29] And they all knew about these games and he says the Christian race says something like this you must run and you must run in such a way that if there were only one prize to be given you would make sure that you would get it.

The Christian race. And I'd like to bring three points before you from this particular version the context surrounding it to try and bring before each one of us the significance and the importance of beginning the race and running the race and concluding this race in such a way that we might obtain that we might get into glory that we might enter port safely the same as that ship entered in earthly terms we will enter glory in heavenly terms if we conclude our race in this way.

First of all then I'd like to mention in the first point the qualification for entry to this race the race in which every believer is active and involved what are the qualifications?

Secondly once we enter this race what rules are there to which we must comply? every sport has rules so has the Christian race and thirdly the prize obtained the prize obtained well these three points there's for a few moments this evening first of all the qualification for entry though many of us I'm sure know a little about some sports and there are rules attached to every one of them and there are rules so far as entry into that sport is concerned think of the sport of boxing for a minute now professional boxers they fight within weight some enter at heavy weights some at light heavy weights some at bantam weight or whatever weight it is and before the bout begins they have to attend the weigh-in and if they don't comply with the weight for that particular group they cannot enter because they're disqualified it's not their group it's not the particular area for which they're qualified so they cannot enter there is also of course the sport of football and

I'm thinking in particular just now of international football and it used to be the case that only a person born in a particular nation could play for the international team of that country maybe it's different nowadays when a person may have a blood relationship with someone who belongs to that country maybe his father or mother that may qualify him in some cases for playing for that international side but the point I'm making is that there must be a particular qualification and a stipulation that has to be satisfied for entry into that particular competition what about the Christian race what are the qualifications well some people say right away well I know I know it's prayer when I go to the schools in my own congregation and ask some of the very youngest pupils about [9 : 38] Christian things and so on this sometimes is the kind of reply that is given if a person wants to be saved pray to God that's the first thing that many of them say well of course prayer is always appropriate and we are asked to pray without ceasing but is that the qualification for entry into the Christian race I think not many attempt prayer who do not actually pray at all and some people say well if it's not prayer then it's certainly something to do with reading the scriptures if I read the scripture day by day if I read the Old Testament and the New Testament then surely I can be identified as a Christian I read the book that Christians love I try and comply with all that it asks me surely that makes me a Christian and that I can be identified as having qualified for entering this race no that's not a qualification either and some people say well

I try both these things but really there's something extra I try and reform my life there are some things that I was doing years ago maybe it was drinking maybe I was involved in some other sin and I've stopped that I really I've sobered up in more ways than one I see the world in different terms in a new light really I have to be a good citizen and people mustn't be able to say about me that I am this or that or the other thing at variance with the word of God in my outward life and some people make that a qualification and they say if they're a good citizen and sociable in their disposition that that is an indication that they have truly entered upon this Christian race no that's not a diver some people say well you've left something out what about church going or about attending church morning and evening on

Sabbath surely that's something surely if I do that often enough it's as if I'll condition my whole self to becoming a Christian surely the effect and the atmosphere of these things will penetrate upon my life and that will qualify me just by going there and coming home again no that isn't it either although we commend church going with all our might in accordance with the scripture that is not what qualifies you to enter this race and I've mentioned there two or three things that are obviously different from the generality of men in the world you are doing something different when you're reading the scriptures regularly you are as it were showing movement when you go to church movement in the right direction but you know have you ever thought of this that many things move there are no life in them think of these wind generators they have in various parts of our country today and in

America and Scandinavia as well they have farms of these windmills and they are turning there indicating that there is power somewhere the wind is turning them and if you went inside these large columns you would find that at the top of that column inside the wind generator there are machines machinery there and there is electricity being produced and that electricity is for the good of a particular community and maybe so many hundred or thousand houses can be supplied with power as a result of the electricity produced by that particular generator but it has no life many things move that have no life what moves people various things move people and yet they have no spiritual life maybe when you read the word of

God you're afraid of the wrath to come maybe that moves you in a particular direction you're afraid of the penalty you're afraid of hell and you start reading your Bible or trying to pray does that make you a Christian surely not maybe it's somebody you saw going to the prayer meeting and you started thinking well I ought to do that if that person became a Christian I think I'll become a Christian that is not the way of looking at the Christian race at all what is the qualification then I don't want to be negative all the time for the qualification is this he must be born again that's the qualification except a man be born of water and of the spirit it says in John 3 and verse 5 he cannot enter the kingdom of God you see the work of the

[15:16] Holy Spirit here illustrate the kind of thing that must happen in our experience if we are truly to enter this Christian race you see we must be cleansed the Holy Spirit in dealing with us effectually must cleanse us in regeneration that is the beginning of the Christian race and no other have you been born again I'm coming back now to the figure of this race the picture of the race if you saw athletes lining up for example for 1500 meter race you sometimes see that on television and you see these people and they are absolutely in the peak of physical condition you know that they are supremely fit and then you see them at the starting blocks you hear the gun being fired and away they go and every muscle is stretched and determination is written large over their faces everyone for all his might or for all her might heading towards that finishing line what about the

Christian race you see people and I'm talking figuratively in the starting blocks of the Christian race what would you see well I think first of all you would see this we'll take it as an individual and he's truly starting the Christian race what does he look like first of all his bones are broken oh you say that's not right that can't be that's a contradiction in terms how can it be possible I'm saying this is what happens in a spiritual way in a spiritual way not in a physical way and how do his bones get broken in this spiritual way well the scripture speaks of it in Psalm 51 the verses we were seeing there the bones which thou hast broken what does it mean it means that the Lord breaks us when he convinces us of our sin he brings us down by his effectual working upon us by his holy spirit it's as if we are given a picture of our backbone being broken the self righteousness of our life is broken our legs are broken because we don't go in any other direction anymore apart from the direction that is heavenward you see this is what the Lord does he breaks us and that happens to everybody who begins the Christian race in truth they are broken they in themselves have no high estimation of themselves contrary to these super fit athletes they have all the confidence in the world in themselves and in what they do and what they are able to do because they are so fit the

Christian says I am nothing I have realized in the light of God's word as it has been revealed to me by his spirit that I am absolutely undone I have nothing to commend me whatsoever I am a sinner and I come before the Lord with that confession Lord have mercy upon me I am a sinner and that's the Christian in the starting blocks but also not only is true of him that his bones are broken but also his heart is broken his heart is broken by you you see by nature our heart is like flint there is no dent left in it in relation to spiritual things our hearts are hard we are so self sufficient and really we do not weep for our sin we are not broken by nature because of our sin when the spirit of God comes this is what he does he breaks the heart in penitence it is broken there are tears of godly sorrow on the face of my soul there are tears of godly sorrow possibly visible to my fellow men as I am broken hearted in the presence of God because of my sin and sins against him thirdly before I go on there is this to be said for the person who is truly starting the Christian race he is on his knees as no athlete can ever be on his knees at a starting block the Christian has bent the knee before God have you ever bent the knee in this way have you bent the knee in prayer has prayer begun in your life surely it begins in the life of those who truly begin the

[21:16] Christian race they have prayers they have a broken heart their bones are broken convinced of their sin and of their nothingness and of their uselessness so far as anything spiritual

is concerned I am nothing that is the way we start and you say well how is it possible for that person even to get up never mind run well I'll tell you the secret is in the power of God not in my power not in the power of the elders of the church or the members of the church or any other power it is the power of God it is the power of God that deals with people in conversion and that power breaks them as I said but that power instilled into their life makes them stronger and stronger so that they are able to do all things through

Christ who strengthens them it is not of us but it is of God in us whoever we are at whatever stage in whatever position or capacity in the church of God we are nothing but Christ is all and his power empowers us my grace he says is sufficient for you and my strength is made perfect in weakness so then if you are to run for Christ you must be born again in or into his kingdom if you are going to play for this glorious side this is the way into it through the new birth it is a blood connection and the blood connection is the blood of Christ sprinkled upon you and cleansing you from all unrighteousness if you are to enter into the

Christian fight you must be the right weight as these boxers I mentioned must be the right weight and what weight is a Christian a true Christian is no light weight may I say this with all reverence a true Christian is a super heavy weight because the glory of God has touched him and that has given his life meaning and gravity that has given his life a particular dimension that no unconverted person possesses the word glory in the Hebrew language has this meaning weight and the glory of God has touched everybody who has been born again and made them significant in weightiness before God the grace of God in them are you the right weight or are you still like a paper weight blown by every wind and will you be blown into eternal damnation because you're not saved the qualification secondly the rules to keep in this race now just coming back again to these sports that I mentioned boxing there are rules there the boxer mustn't punch his opponent when he's down he mustn't punch below a certain level and all these other sports are the same with rules and regulations a person who's involved in running in a hurdle race for example he must keep to his own particular lane and go over the hurdles and then come up to the finishing line what are the particular rules to be followed by

Christians where are they to be found when we see that they are to be found in God's word the only rule to direct enjoy him and we see that there are a few things in this context that give us an indication as to what kind of rules we must seek to follow in the world verse 25 says everyone who strives for the mastery that is a rule there must be a constant striving it's not a laid back business being a Christian it is not like somebody resting on his oars and letting the wind untied move him along no and the word used for striving there by the apostle is the same word as agonizing in our own

English language we must agonize in this grace and agonize for the mastery and also it says verse 25 every such one is temperate in all things temperate in all things the word temperate there means self control the same word as used by Paul when he was addressing Felix and he spoke to him concerning righteousness temperance and judgment to come self control he mustn't as it were leave our life without control this involves of course abstaining from every appearance of evil wherever evil becomes apparent wherever evil becomes visible you must abstain avoid it like the plague you mustn't play with sin you mustn't play with fire if you do you will get burnt and that is what it says here everyone must be temperate in all things come ye out he says from among them touch not the unclean thing there are things indifferent certainly we must pray to the

[27 : 57] Lord to be led in particular in a particular way so far as these things are concerned but so far as these sinful things are concerned we must avoid them like the plague of death that they are also thinking about the athletes if they are in training for a particular race they must never ever be careless with their diet they have to have a certain intake they have to be careful that they don't indulge in various foods that would be contrary to their weight program or their training so also with a Christian what intake must the Christian have oh the most wholesome food to be found in God's word this is the diet of the Christian God's word the rule that leads his life and the food that gives him strength for going on you seek to be fed from

God's word seek to be fed from this pulpit as the minister expounds the message of the gospel sabbath after sabbath this is feeding this is for your soul this is the way you are to be built up this is the way you are to be equipped for going on in the Christian life to the glory of God unto the salvation of your own soul and he goes on in verse 26 therefore I run I therefore so run it's a run and he says it is not as uncertainly this man knows where he's going he's not wondering is it this

way or that way if you think of a group of runners in a stadium and one of them isn't sure of which way to go which particular track to take he's going to lose the race but the Christian knows which way to go because the Lord has enlightened him in the knowledge of Christ and has given him the rules of faith and life in God's word and if you need to know where to situation pray over God's word ask the Lord to lead you in accordance with his own word the Christians they know where they're going it was said of godly man some centuries back he was a young minister of the gospel and this he was an unmarried gentleman at the time and this young girl herself a Christian fell in love with him and the girl parents they weren't very happy with the man with whom she had fallen in love they didn't know where he came from you see possibly they weren't aware of his connections and so on and they asked her where does he come from who are his connections she says that is irrelevant to me

I know where he's going and I want to go with him she knew he was going to glory and he was walking the Christian race or running the Christian race I should say and she says I'm not really interested in who his people are there are some people like that unless you know the proper connections are made with those with whom they become associated or so on they're not too keen on going along well the thing is this so far as this gentleman was concerned this girl knew where he was going he was a godly man and she says I want to go with him something like Ruth and Naomi thy people are my people and thy God is my God well this is something this man he was running not as one who was unsure but he was making sure that he would run his race and persevere in it and we see he changes the angle on things in verse 26 he says so fight

I he's been thinking of running now he says there's another aspect to this Christian life it's like fighting it's like boxing and he says I fight not as one who beats the air he says I'm not a shadow boxer I'm not here as it were punching away at the air there is purpose to this fight and what does he say who's the opponent verse 27 I keep under my body I keep that under what does he mean by that he means the whole of his sinful nature you see although Christians are forgiven their sins yet there is still corruption within them and they must strive and fight to keep that under and that is a full time job for everyone who is on this road they keep under their body and bring it into subjection you think it's easy being a

[33 : 49] Christian it is a fight to the finish I tell you every day but this has to be added it's a fight to be won and it's a fight that will be ultimately gloriously won because at the last when we close our eyes in death the souls of believers are made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory their bodies being still united to Christ to rest in the graves till the resurrection that is it the battle is over the battle is won glory is entered whatever difficulties whatever trials whatever steep hills whatever enemies it's all going to be a victory and how a person with broken bones can't do much a person with a broken heart can't do much a person on his knees can't do that much but you see this spiritual race a spiritual fight is a fight won by a greater one than ourselves if God be for us who can be against us who

I know the hosts of hell are against every Christian but I know that there is a greater one with us than against us the Lord Jesus Christ is the king of kings and the Lord of lords the mighty savior able to save to the uttermost all who come unto God through him he says I am with you in this race lo I am with you always even unto the end of the world we heard this morning from the song of Solomon a few words describing the church of Christ the Christian coming through this wilderness and the question was asked who is this that cometh up from the wilderness leaning upon our beloved the leaning of the church of the Christian upon Christ ensures the victory of the Christian the Christian will win the race surely that's the second point and the rules to keep but thirdly and finally the prize obtained the prize obtained now the picture we have I'm sure behind the apostles words here have relevance to the Grecian games where the runners who receive the prize were given an olive wreath or a garland of pine leaves that is the way their victory was shown and he says here now what they have received there is corruptible it's a corruptible crown surely that's what the world gives to everyone who lives for the world we think of these sportsmen who have such great earnings think of the snooker players who win so many competitions and they have checks of thousands of pounds given to them and other sportsmen as well but you see these are things really that will just run out of their hands what good is that when it comes to a deathbed what good are these things what good is a row of trophies on your mantelpiece when God says you are going to a lost eternity because you haven't believed in

Christ what good is it to have all that money in your bank account and maybe it's a means of satisfaction to you to think that you have all these things tied up your account is full and so on well although these things in a measure are acceptable remember the day will come when you will count it as nothing the day of your death requires greater riches and more substantial investment than this world can ever offer it requires more than a row of little cups on your sideboard it requires something that is incorruptible and what is it well he says here that Christians are to receive an incorruptible crown what does that mean it means that they will receive the crown of glory and that is incorruptible it doesn't corrupt their life and of itself it will not corrupt it is a crown that is evergreen that is the kind of provision the Lord makes for repenting sinners an inheritance he says incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away what a marvelous provision the Lord has for as many as begin this race properly as many as run it according to the rules and as many as reach the end in this glorious way what about yourself he says here so run so run he says that ye may obtain how urgent it is you remember when the angels came to Sodom and they brought Lot out of that place you remember what was said to him escape for thy life look not behind thee neither stay thou in all the plain escape to the mountain lest thou be consumed how urgent it is the city of destruction is where you are in your lost condition in your Christless condition in your godless and hopeless condition as a sinner in the world that is the city where you are to be destroyed if you continue in your impenitence so run run that you might obtain run fully dependent upon the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who is able to save you to save you to the uttermost the one who said come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and die will give you rest come unto me and once your eyes have opened to behold him you will not meander towards him you will run because in him you will have life and life in all its abundance let us pray [41 : 56] Lord our God we thank thee this evening for thine own word we thank thee for the work of thy spirit a spirit who is able to enlighten our minds so that we may understand in a measure the greatness of our need and the greatness of the provision of the Lord against our need bless this large congregation we pray thee oh do thou give them to cast all their burdens upon thyself and give them to flee from the wrath to come for the wrath of God most certainly will come we thank thee that the scripture speaks of those who at that day of judgment will be on thy right hand and they will be asked to come unto thyself to enter into the joy of the Lord but others on thy left hand will be told to go away from thee with an eternal going away into the place of woe grant that none of us here would hear that voice from the throne of judgment grant each of us O Lord to make our calling and election sure and to cast all our burdens upon thee to thou forgive all our sin for Jesus sake Amen Amen