

1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Psalm 30

## **Running the Race**

### **Striving for Excellence**

The Christian life has often been described as a race. In the Bible, in our hymns, in the way we are apt to speak about our faith the metaphor of a journey, a race crops up time and again. There was a time not that long ago when schools frowned on anything that was too competitive – inclusion was the name of the game and anything that might detract from that was downgraded. I'm still for inclusion and participation and these important aspects should be affirmed. But there is also room for striving for excellence and celebrating achievement. These are not only for the successful athlete or scholar – they can have a positive impact on lots of people. Of course, they can be overdone but I'm glad that there appears to be more place being given to such things. I was reading recently about the preparations for the 2024 Olympics still 18 months away. Without doubt, there will be increasing hype leading up to what is a key event in the world calendar. What a headache of organisation! Think for a moment about the enormous number of sportsmen and women competing for over 10,000 places in the games. Can we begin to imagine the hard work and effort that has already gone into training? And which will doubtless intensify as Paris draws near? Early mornings, careful diet, strict routine and considerable cost in time, effort (and in many cases) money in order to ensure that they are in the best position to secure a qualifying place and do their best at the games. Paul is right – top athletes need to show considerable commitment and sustained effort if they are to have any possibility of being at the Olympics, never mind among the medals. For what purpose? For a laurel crown, nowadays for a gold medal – and the privilege of seeing your country's flag on the highest flagstaff, and hearing your own national anthem? Essentially, for the honour, for the prestige and the satisfaction of knowing that you have been victorious. (For some, it will lead to a profitable career in professional sport but for most, it is for its own sake. And even these days, winning an Olympic medal is no mean achievement. For the top athletes second best isn't good enough. The top spot on the podium is the only one that matters. But thankfully, as far as the Christian faith is concerned, we are all winners in Christ. Rather like a modern-day marathons, everyone who competes and finishes "the race" receives a prize. We can all be winners! To use last week's phrase – "what's the point?" Are we really saying that we are not interested in something that is free? This isn't a Buy One Get One Free offer. This isn't a throw away. The "prize" here is tremendous – eternal salvation, life in the presence and purposes of God for all time and eternity – and it cost the Son of God his life – it is most certainly worth having!

### **Free and costly?**

What is often confusing is the fact that salvation is both costly and free. Costly to Christ Jesus – the Son of God went to the cross so that we might be forgiven, yet free to us in that there is nothing we can contribute to our own salvation. God accepts us free and for nothing IN CHRIST. "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." It is humbling to realise that apart from Christ we are helpless and lost. We

prefer to be independent, to be self-sufficient, to do it on our own. But that is not the way. The cost is all his. For us, it is free, gratis and for nothing. We need to swallow our pride and put on the cloak of humility and accept that most precious of all gifts, the gift of eternal life, of fellowship with God, of salvation, by grace, through faith in the Saviour Son of God. In computer speak it is “free to the end user” but it was secured at great price – Christ’s was a costly love – and we demean the significance of his sacrifice and of our salvation that it won, if we regard it as anything else. It was free for us, but came at great cost to the Lord Jesus.

But it is both costly and free in another sense too. Looking at it from our standpoint, the prize is free, but the consequences are costly. It’s not that we are given our salvation freely but then there is “payback” for the rest of our lives. Our salvation remains forever free – but a heartfelt response to the love shown to us will issue in love and obedience towards the Saviour. We will never be able to “pay him back” – it’s not restitution or reimbursement – but, with the Holy Spirit working in us, it can be genuine heartfelt love, dedicated service IN RESPONSE TO the deep love that Jesus has shown to us. In the words of the Easter hymn “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands, my soul, my life, my all.” And so, for the modern-day disciple as well as the athletes of ancient Corinth (and of the modern Olympics) there is a call to dedication and commitment. For the Christian it is as a response to the costly love of the Saviour who laid down his life for his friends, for us.

### **Run the straight race**

I get the impression that Paul is urging his readers to compete in the race of life, in the Christian life, AS THOUGH there was only one prize to be had. To be as committed to journey with Christ and heed his commands, as someone striving for Olympic honour might engage in their training. No one just “wins a medal”; some will have to display more physical strength and stamina than others, but all will have put in sustained effort over a considerable period and will have forgone other things in their quest for success. Have we like educational policies a while back forgotten the importance of taking the call to commitment (in our case the call to follow Christ) seriously? Discipleship/commitment is not for the “odd few” – it is for each and every one of us who claims the name of Jesus. The form it will take will differ enormously according to our circumstances and gifting BUT we are all in the race of life, a race which has a certain end, if we run it with Jesus - but a race that still must be run. I have never run a marathon, but I am in no doubt that running the Christian race is more akin to a marathon than a 100 metre sprint. Our salvation is freely given through our faith in our Saviour Jesus Christ but our heart response to his saving grace will prompt us to love him and serve him and others for his sake our whole life through. We fail to take his sacrifice seriously if we pass up on this obligation. And we fail to take the opposition seriously if we imagine that living the Christian life these days is going to be plain sailing. We make a big mistake if we imagine that we earn God’s favour by our goodness or efforts. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone BUT equally we err if we imagine that having been forgiven in Christ, we can simply

coast through life, paying scant heed to Christ's call to take up our cross and follow him.

Some might argue that it is simply human nature and that the higher you set the bar, the fewer people who will attempt to reach it, never mind succeed in clearing it. That the more "demands" you make, the fewer who will embark on the process and the more casualties you will leave along the way. Of course, we need to be sensitive but such an approach forgets three things – 1) the cost of the sacrifice by which our salvation was won and the depth of the love that prompted it 2) the wonderful provision that God makes to each and every one of his followers, the equipping by his Spirit and Christ's promised presence with us. He really is with us always and he never asks us to do anything for him without also providing us with the means of achieving it and 3) the joy to be found (even amid all the ups and downs, knocks and setbacks) in journeying with the living God and being co-workers with the risen Christ. Far, far better than standing atop an Olympic podium (though I'm sure that must be an exhilarating experience). What price can you put on the Saviour saying "Well done, good and faithful servant"?

Run the straight race with God's good grace. Fight the good fight. These are only metaphors. They don't convey all that there is to say or know about the Christian life. They may give the impression either that success in the Christian faith is "down to us", is only possible by our sheer effort OR that such is simply beyond our abilities. It's not that. Our salvation is all of grace, comes by the free gift of God, through Christ our Saviour BUT that the appropriate response to that incredible gift of love is in gratitude to live out of love for him, by his provision, for his glory.

I won't be going to the Olympics, either as a competitor or spectator, though I wish all who are going every success and a tremendous time. I'll no doubt see some of it on TV – but I will, hopefully with you, continue to engage in the race of life, and seek not only with all my powers, but in the promised power of the Holy Spirit, to seek to hold fast to the faith and love and follow the Lord Jesus in word and action all my life through. The prize is assured. Seek, serve and follow Christ.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.