

EXCERPTS FROM “Live in Liberty: The Spiritual Message of Galatians”  
by Daniel Bush & Noel Due

In the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, Mary Decker was favored to win gold in the women’s 3000 meters. On the third lap she was side-by-side with Zola Budd from South Africa, running barefoot and on behalf of Great Britain. Budd decided to overtake. Wanting to keep pressure on Budd, Decker remained close, collided with another runner, fell, and tumbled onto the in-field. Apparently, it’s an accepted convention for the lead runner to be a full stride ahead before cutting in—well, on that day, in that race, that didn’t happen. But in an interview years later Mary Decker said, “The reason I fell, some people think she tripped me deliberately. I happen to know that wasn’t the case at all. **The reason I fell is because I am, and was, very inexperienced in running in a pack.**”

**Do you know how to run in a pack?** The pack isn’t just the church. It’s the world, believers and nonbelievers included. And it’s the group in which where we’re running every day. Sometimes we’re cut off from the lead. Sometimes we just stumble. Other times we’re in open space. But we’re always in the race. ... **We run as we began: strengthened for every stride by grace, through faith.**

\* **REMEMBERING HOW WE BEGAN**

**God never lures us from grace, or away from faith. If you hear any voice from any preacher doing that—even if they look and sound like an angel from heaven—sniff the air for a waft of sulfur.** They haven’t come from God. Paul says such “persuasion is not from him who calls you” (Gal 5:8). If law-keeping were the necessary means to continue in the Christian life, God’s calling by grace would be contradicted (Gal 1:6). To be called by grace, and then to be told that you must proceed by works, is a bait-and-switch tactic. God called us by

grace through Jesus, and he doesn’t ask us to proceed by another means. He’s no con artist, and the gospel isn’t false advertising.

**So the first strategy for running in the pack is remembering: We began by faith.** We didn’t begin when we decided to come to church or to take sacraments as proof of our piety. We came as beggars, and we are beggars still, trusting in God’s promises above all else. Moralism—believing God will favor you when you commit yourself to moral improvement—isn’t grace, yet grace is the only hope of a truly moral life. Your life didn’t change as a precondition of faith; faith changed your life!

Running is learning to focus on the one who said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). It’s keeping your eyes on Jesus in the midst of the flying elbows and intruding feet. In his Lectures on Romans, Martin Luther said, “To progress is always to begin again.” Or, as Tullian Tchividjian has put it, **“Sanctification is the daily hard work of getting back to the reality of our justification. It’s going back to the certainty of our objectively secured pardon in Christ and hitting the refresh button a thousand times a day.”**

That’s how we go forward. We go back to the truth over and over again to understand who we are and find our identity as it is in Jesus, not as the pack tell us.

And G. C. Berkouwer has said it’s a mistake to ask: We know we have imputed righteousness, but now how do we move on to actual righteousness? We do not “move on.” Any particular flaw in our actual righteousness stems from a corresponding failure to orient ourselves toward our imputed righteousness. Sanctification happens to the degree that we “feed on” or “orient to” ... the pardon,

righteousness, and new status we now have in Christ, imputed through faith.

Progress toward the goal occurs in **learning to live the justified life.** It’s going deeper into the reality of it; living in the truth of it, despite all appearances to the contrary. This is Paul’s point when he speaks of “obeying the truth” (Gal 5:7). **What truth has he been talking about for five chapters? The gospel! “Obeying the truth” is living in the truth of the gospel.** The Judaizers were disobeying the truth in their teaching, and getting the Galatians to follow. To defend the truth of faith in our own hearts, to preach that truth to the hearts of others, to live in the love that flows from faith: this is obeying the truth.

\* **REMEMBERING GRACE**

**The second strategy is to remember grace—which we need to do often.** The devil is crafty; he’s a master at the art of distraction. Magicians call it misdirection, drawing your attention to something else so they can deceive you. The devil begins his sleight of hand by convincing us we are doing either rather well or rather poorly, that God must be either pleased or disappointed with us due to any number of reasons. The distraction then leads to the main game, driving us further inward with his accusations and flattery. Then—presto!—we tumble off the track, knocking a few others down as we fall. Why? Because “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (Gal 5:9). This common proverb pulls us back to when the Hebrews were told to bake the Passover bread without yeast; they’d be ready to run from their Egyptian slavery in haste, unencumbered by still-rising dough (Exod 12:8–11). **Run when grace comes calling! Flee to it, hide in it, remember it!**

**\*\*\*What’s going on in Galatia? Paul has been accused of not taking the law seriously enough.** The Judaizers are saying, “Hey Galatians, Paul was off, we’re here to get you back on track. You want to know the delight of God in your life? You

want to have peace from that berating conscience of yours? Then something more than faith in Jesus is required.” But Paul says, “No—we need nothing but Jesus.” Paul takes the law so seriously he knows our only help is to throw ourselves on the mercy of Christ.

**\*\*\*British preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explained the accusation against Paul well: There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel of salvation than this, that some people might misunderstand it and misinterpret it to mean ... you can go on sinning as much as you like because it will redound all the more to the glory of grace.... If a man preaches justification by works, no one would ever raise this question.** If a man’s preaching is, “If you want to be Christians, and if you want to go to heaven, you must stop committing sins, you must take up good works, and if you do so regularly and constantly, and do not fail to keep on at it, you will make yourselves Christians, you will reconcile yourselves to God and you will go to heaven.” Obviously a man who preaches in that strain would never be liable to this misunderstanding. Nobody would say to such a man, “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?”, because the man’s whole emphasis is just this, that if you go on sinning you are certain to be damned, and only if you stop sinning can you save yourselves.... Nobody has ever brought this charge against the Church of Rome, but it was brought frequently against Martin Luther... **It is the charge that formal, dead Christianity ... has always brought against this startling, staggering message, that God “justifies the ungodly.”**

When Paul is charged with being a lawless antinomian he doesn’t answer by saying, “Oh, right, oops! I forgot the law.” **He answers by giving more gospel.** “Antinomians do not believe the gospel too much, but too little! They restrict the power of the gospel to the problem of sin’s guilt, while Paul tells us that the gospel is the power for sanctification as

well as justification.”

\*\*\*\*\***Grace is the power for running the Christian life in its entirety, not for merely beginning it.** We run well as we continue to remember the grace by which we run.

### \* **RELYING ON GOD**

**Do we fail, do we fall, do we forget? Of course!** “But thank God! He has made us his captives and continues to lead us along in Christ’s triumphal procession,” calling us further into his grace (2 Cor 2:14 NLT). We believe this is what is behind Paul’s confidence that the Galatians “will take no other view than [his], and the one who is troubling [them] will bear the penalty, whoever he is” (Gal 5:10). **This isn’t confidence in logic, persuasive powers, or the Galatians’ good sense. Paul confidently trusts God to sort things out.**

\*\*Anxiety is the default position of the flesh. **Therefore, as a true and good pastor, Paul places his focus on the one true Shepherd. His confidence is in God. God will keep his flock and deal with the troublemaker in his time.** What encouragement! And what a contrast to Paul’s days as a Pharisee, when his first impulse was to run to the law to sort things out—even if it meant murder! And that straight-line, right-handed use of power is another default position of the flesh to bring about immediacy.

\*\*\***Things might seem to be messy—or be messy—but God has us in his good hands. Run by relying on God; evil can’t touch his plan and purpose.**

### \* **REMAINING IN THE WORD OF THE CROSS**

George Bernard Shaw telegraphed Winston Churchill just prior to the opening of the play Major Barbara: “Have reserved two tickets for first night.

Come and bring a friend if you have one.” Churchill wired back: “Impossible to come to first night. Will come to second night, if you have one.”

Sometimes it’s appropriate to defend yourself. Paul’s defense is not as comical as Churchill’s, but it’s laser sharp: “ ‘But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?’ (Gal 5:11). If I were preaching circumcision, the offense of the cross would be dissipated. I wouldn’t be drawing all this fire; so why the persecution?” (Need we ask?) It’s because Paul is preaching precisely Christ crucified and applying the full ramifications of what that means. Persecution calls out the fact that he’s honoring God rather than human sensibilities or effort. **The cross testifies to our inability to lift ourselves from the muddy infield and put ourselves on the track. It strips away any pretense of spiritual achievement.**

\*\*\***During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther debated Catholic humanist Desiderius Erasmus on the nature of grace.** Erasmus admitted that sin had made humanity sick and said that grace is like one parent helping a wobbly toddler across the room to the other parent, who is crouching down with an enticing apple. The nearby parent watches the little one; if he starts to fall, this parent will hold him for a moment so he can still cross the room under his own power. **But Luther, offended by such a weak and pitiful view of grace cried “no!” and countered, “Grace is like a caterpillar in a ring of fire. The only help is from above.”**

Natural reason neither understands nor accepts—and, in fact, hates—this truth (1 Cor 2:14). Why is it so offensive? Because it negates self-sufficiency and bombs to bits the I-can-do-it-myself mentality which is our shelter from grace. Just look at the abundance of self-help books today; we

seem hard-wired for “how-to’s.” But Paul’s answer is never, “How?” but, “Who?” Christian living isn’t taking the Bible, shaking its pages until a few principles fall out, and then applying them like a baking recipe. To separate Christ from his benefits is deeply destructive. He lifts us from the ring of fire—he doesn’t help us along with principles and tips.

### \* **ROARING FOR THE GOSPEL**

Filled with love for the Galatians, Paul says: “I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves” (Gal 5:12). **That’s a polite translation of a pretty strong phrase. In effect, Paul’s saying, “I wish they’d slip and cut the whole lot off, making themselves eunuchs.”** According to Deuteronomy 23:1, eunuchs were barred from the temple assembly (emasculatation being a pagan practice). “Go ahead,” says Paul, “remove yourselves completely from the fellowship—take off, leave the Church alone!”

**Whoa! Is that language we should be hearing from a church leader? In our age of tolerance, we wonder if we could accept such political incorrectness. If you were in Paul’s place, would you roar? If not, whom are you trying to impress? Whom do you want to please? And why?**

#### **Think about it.**

There’s no need to sugarcoat this: Paul’s livid! But he’s defending both the gospel and the Galatians themselves. He may roar loudly, but he’s right and true; only love can do this.

\*\*\*\*\***The caricature of a pastor as a nice man standing in front of nice people telling them to be even nicer is far removed from true apostolic ministry. Apostolic ministry is hand-to-hand combat, with the devil breathing down your neck and the cross your only sword. There is no room for self-help-focused, legalistic, moralistic, “nice” cultural religion.**

In most of Paul’s writings, the “flesh” is not our

body, but our sinful nature. It’s the whole realm of human mind, emotions, will, and bodily appetites as ruled by sin. It’s entirely egoistic and refuses to be subdued. Neither education nor religion can change it. It’s avaricious, ruthless in its drive for self-aggrandizement. **And it loves religion; religion is, after all, the flesh trying to be spiritual.** It’s the part of our hearts with “the passion for self (‘Give me what I need’), the passion for control (‘I’ll make it happen’), the passion to define (‘This is life, and this is death’), and the passion to perform (‘I’ll try to be good, but can’t You just let me do what I want?’).”

*[All excerpts from Bush, D., & Due, N. (2015). Live in Liberty: The Spiritual Message of Galatians (pp. 157-170). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.]*



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