

Spirit-led Race of Grace

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Do you remember that scene from *Chariots of Fire* when Eric Liddell runs with his head thrown back, arms pumping wildly, face lit with pure joy? It's not the controlled form of an athlete grinding toward victory. It's the abandoned movement of someone carried by something greater.

Liddell once said, "I believe God made me for a purpose, but He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure." He didn't run to earn God's love. He ran from within God's love already freely given. That's what we celebrate today on Reformation Sunday: faith is not a desperate sprint to win divine approval. It's a Spirit-led race run in the freedom of grace.

Joel speaks to people who know desolation. Locusts have devoured their crops. Drought has cracked their land. Hope feels distant. But into that despair, God speaks: "*Be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given the early rain for your vindication*" (v. 23).

Then comes one of Scripture's most stunning promises: "*I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh*" (v. 28). Not just on priests or prophets. Not just on the powerful or pious. On all flesh—young and old, servants and free, men and women alike.

Where there was scarcity, now abundance flows. The Spirit doesn't trickle down through proper channels. It pours out like torrential rain, soaking everyone who stands in the open. This is the fuel for the race we're called to run—not human effort, but the Spirit, free and life-giving.

Paul writes from prison, death approaching. "*I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*" (vv. 6-7).

There's no panic in his voice. No last-minute scrambling to get his spiritual résumé in order. Just peace. Deep, settled peace. Why? Because Paul knows the "crown of righteousness" isn't earned by speed or strength. It's a gift given to "all who have longed for his appearing." Grace carried him from start to finish.

Paul's assurance echoes Joel's prophecy. The same Spirit poured out on all flesh sustains faith when everything else fails. This is the race of grace—run not by human power but by divine presence.

Martin Luther nearly destroyed himself trying to be good enough for God. He prayed for hours, confessed every sin, punished his body with fasting. Still, peace eluded him.

Then he encountered Paul's words in Romans: "*The righteous shall live by faith*" (Romans 1:17). Something broke open. Salvation wasn't a prize for moral perfection. It was a gift of divine mercy. Luther proclaimed that we are saved by faith alone (*Sola Fide*).

He wrote, "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace—so certain that it would give up life a thousand times trusting in it."ⁱ

That confidence changed everything. Grace was no longer confined behind church doors or sold through indulgences. Like the rain in Joel's prophecy, it poured freely on all who dared to stand in the downpour. Through this awakening, the Reformation dismantled the rigid barriers between priests and laypeople, ultimately paving the way for the rise of modern democracy.

Two centuries later, John Wesley was exhausted. He'd done everything right—missionary work, rigorous devotion, moral discipline. Yet he felt spiritually empty.

On May 24, 1738, in a small meeting on Aldersgate Street, someone read from Luther's preface to Romans. Wesley later wrote: "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine."ⁱⁱ

Like Luther, Wesley had been running the wrong race—striving for worthiness instead of receiving love. Grace opened his eyes: salvation isn't about being worthy. It's about being willing to receive what's already offered.

Both reformers started as runners in the lane of striving—full of religious zeal but haunted by fear. Grace rerouted them into a different race, one guided by the Spirit rather than driven by sweat.

In our world of constant comparison and competition, grace changes everything about the race. It's no longer about outrunning others or proving your worth. It's about responding to a calling.

The Spirit transforms our running from anxious striving to joyful movement, from exhausting effort to sustained endurance.

Picture Luther hammering his 95 Theses to the church door—not in bitter rebellion, but in hope that ordinary people might encounter grace directly. Imagine Wesley riding through English towns, bringing the gospel to miners and the poor, his heart still warm with assurance.

They point us toward a race that's deeply personal yet gloriously communal. We're not running against each other. We're running toward the fullness of God's love.

Wesley agreed with other reformers, saying, "True faith cannot be hidden; it will break out and show itself by good works." ⁱⁱⁱ Luther also said: Faith "does not ask whether good works are to be done; before the question is asked, it has already done them." ^{iv}

When the Spirit leads, goodness becomes natural rather than forced—like rain that can't help but fall, or like runners whose feet can't help but dance.

Many of us are tired. The world's pace is relentless. We strive for control, for health, for security. We ache for rest yet find ourselves running harder than ever.

Reformation Sunday invites us to stop running for grace and start running with grace.

God doesn't hand us salvation like a medal at the finish line. God runs beside us from the start—breathing life into our lungs, offering strength for the next step, whispering joy through the wind.

Maybe your race has taken you through dry fields where hope feels distant. Joel's promise stands: the rain will come. "*I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten*" (v. 25).

Maybe you sense, like Paul, that your race is nearing its final laps. You're not alone. The crown of righteousness isn't some far-off reward—it's the peace that comes from knowing grace has carried you all along.

And maybe, like Luther or Wesley, you're somewhere in the middle—still struggling, still striving, still wondering if you've done enough.

The Reformation whispers across the centuries: *You are enough, because Christ is enough.*

We're not solo sprinters in this race. We're a community—the body of Christ, surrounded by what Paul called “a great cloud of witnesses.” Our elders, our saints, our ancestors in the faith—they all cheer us onward.

Luther complained that the church had “hidden the gospel under a bushel.” Reformation Sunday calls us to lift that light high again—to proclaim not fear but freedom, not judgment but joy.

Wesley reminds us that grace was never meant to be hoarded. It must flow outward in love, in acts of justice and mercy, in compassion for both neighbor and stranger.

When that love animates our steps, even the weary can run without fainting.

In times when our communities seem fractured—when suspicion, judgment, or pride tempt us to draw circles around who belongs and who does not—the Spirit calls us to a deeper grace. The gospel was poured out not for one kind of person, but for all hearts willing to receive.

Yet our culture encourages us to measure ourselves against others, to assume some are more deserving than the rest. Joel's vision and the hearts of the Reformers invite us to remember that the rain of God's Spirit falls where it will. We share a common need: to be restored, renewed, and welcomed.

May we resist the urge to claim more worth than our neighbor, remembering that grace is the great equalizer, abundant enough to end every drought of division and every famine of compassion.

At the end of *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell runs with unrestrained joy. His head tilts back, his arms flail freely, his face is radiant. It's not the posture of control—it's the posture of abandon. He runs as one carried by something greater.

On this Reformation Sunday, that's our invitation: to run not for approval, but in freedom. Not by our own power, but by the Spirit's wind.

As Joel promised, the Spirit is poured out—on all flesh, including you.

As Paul testified, the race can be finished in peace—held by grace from start to finish.

As Luther and Wesley showed us, grace is the heartbeat of every step we take.

Let us run, then, as those who feel God's pleasure. Let us become witnesses to grace that never runs dry. And when the finish line comes—whether tomorrow or years from now—may we say with full and grateful hearts:

“I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.”
Amen.

ⁱ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans,” in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 371.

ⁱⁱ John Wesley, *Journal of John Wesley*, 24 May 1738.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Doctrine of Salvation, Faith, and Good Works* (Oxford, 1738), II.5 (*Works*, 12:40).

^{iv} Luther, “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans,” 370.