

Who can run the race?
Gal 3:23 – 4:7

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Introduction: The Olympics

- How many of you know that the Olympics have begun?
- How many of you plan to watch the Olympics?
- How many of you are going to be participating in the Olympics this year?

Obviously, there are a variety of factors that one needs in order to participate in the Olympics:

- First of all, you need to have the physical skills necessary to do so.
- Then, you need to have extensive training, not just over a few weeks, but over years and years.
- Finally, among all of your peers who have these same physical skills and training, you need to be chosen because you are deemed the very best in your field from your country.

But, that's today. It wasn't so in the original Olympics. True, you had to have physical skills and training. But, not just anyone who had these could compete in the Olympics.

- You had to be a man, not a woman;
- you had to be Greek, not someone from one of the many other countries of the world;
- and you had to be a Greek citizen, not a slave.

In other words, you had to be what would be called a "son".

Three differences between sons and slaves

In the world of Greece, and in the world of Rome that followed, the world that the apostle Paul spoke to, not all males were sons. Of course, every male is born of a mother and father and is what we today would call a "son" of parents. But that's our scientific definition of the word.

For the Greek, as for the Roman, to be "a son" meant three things.

First, a son was the male offspring of a father who was a free citizen of a free land, be it one of the Greek states or of Rome. Female offspring or the offspring of anyone who wasn't a free citizen, like slaves, could never hope to be a citizen of the land. Only the citizens, the sons of Greece, looked longingly for the day when they might run in the race that would lead to the Olympics. They alone could run in that race.

A slave, like a woman, was someone who had lost his freedom, his ability to determine his own destiny. A slave has no freedom but is rather the property of the master, usually, to be treated well, but still at the

discretion of the master, in much the same way that pets are to us today. And so, too, the children of slaves: “Children born to a slave mother belonged to her master, regardless of who the father was, just as the offspring of livestock belonged to their owner”.¹ At sporting events, like the Olympics, slaves, like women and children, would stand back and serve those who ran.

The **second** thing that being a son meant was that you uniquely learned from your father. To be a “son” was to obey your father, as opposed to someone who didn’t obey.

There were, of course male offspring, who, once they reached the age of maturity, shared all the benefits of their father, but decided that they really didn’t want to be sons. So, they would leave the father’s house and sever all ties.

Jesus tells a parable about one such young man who, though his father’s offspring, decided not to obey his father anymore. So, he asked his father to give him his inheritance and severed his ties with his family. He ceased to be a son. When he had lost all the money that his father had given him, he decides to go back to his family, but he knows that he can’t go back as a son. He says to himself: I’ll go home and just be a slave in my father’s house.

What that young man was proposing to do would have put him in a very different relationship to his father than the one that he had grown up with, for the *obedience* of the son is quite different from the *service* of the slave. A slave doesn’t just obey, he serves his master. In the words of the ancient world: he loves his master. A slave loves his master in the same way that a wife loves her husband and infants love their parents: their every move revolves around the wishes of their master and always will, like pets. They will serve him with all that they are and all that they have and it will always be that way. They are not their own, and they never will be. As much as pets are part of the family, they clearly do not have the same rights as family members. Sons are not trained like slaves, who are like animals who can be trained to do work; sons are taught.

And this brings us to the **third** point about being a son. It is that, unlike slaves, who are controlled by their masters, the sons of the household, if they are obedient, will be raised to become free masters. A son becomes what the father is, namely, a free land-owning citizen, having slaves who fulfill his wishes. A son, in other words, becomes an heir.

But, if the son’s destiny, his future, is to have an identity -- land, property, something that will make him a full citizen in his country --, what is the destiny of the slave? Nothing. At the very best, a slave’s destiny is to be treated differently from other slaves because of special talents that the slave might have or because of the family that the slave might work for. Yes, there were some, extraordinarily special slaves who might even be given their freedom or somehow find a way to buy their freedom. (The character in the novel Ben-Hur comes to mind, or perhaps even the father of Paul the Apostle, who appears to have been a Roman citizen.) But, these are exceptions. The destiny of the vast majority of slaves is the same as that of pets: to be used by the master until they die, or to become entertainment for the master and his family. (And remember: the destiny of women in this world is very similar and can be summed up in the word “pet”.)

A very few humans in Paul’s day were sons, who shared their fathers’ freedom, who in their obedience learn from their father what it means to be a free citizen, and who eventually become free, land-owning citizens, shaping the country that is theirs.

These are they who can run in the race of the Olympics as testimony to their freedom and to the servitude of the vast majority of persons in Greece and Rome, slaves and women.

The connection to Galatians 3.23-4.7

Well, what does this have to do with the reading from Paul? Everything.

Paul, as you know, had come to the Roman province of Galatia and had preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people that he had found there: to men and women, to Jews and Greeks, and to free men -- sons -- and to slaves. In the gospel that he preached, Paul had shocked his listeners when he had said that everyone, whether male or female, Jew or non-Jew, free son or slave, was in fact a slave because of sin.

But Paul had also said that everyone could also be free, no matter what their social status. Now, this, too, must have profoundly shocked his listeners, especially, slaves and women. For how could they be free, how could they be sons? Paul told them how: anyone who accepts Jesus Christ becomes free, just like a son. Such a person is freed by God the Father through the sacrifice of his son Jesus on behalf of those who are in bondage and slavery, freed to a relationship of obedience to God the Father, a relationship in which, as long as you continue to learn from the Father, you will be considered a son, whether you make mistakes or get every lesson right, freed to inherit the fruitful and productive land, the kingdom.

Many of these to whom Paul preached believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and were freed from their slavery, spiritual but also social, when they became sons of God.

But, when Paul returned to visit the Galatians some time later, the surprise was his: what Paul found, after being away is that, in his absence, other preachers had come along and told these same people who had been freed, who had become sons, that Paul's proclamation of freedom wasn't necessary after all. That they needed order, and discipline, that they needed masters who would tell them what to do, that freedom was dangerous and that the Spirit that Paul talked about made you do things that weren't suitable.

As Paul sees it, what those preachers were telling the people of Galatia was that slavery wasn't so bad after all. And, in fact, their message must have been even more compelling than Paul's, because many or most of Paul's initial converts in Galatia appear to have turned back to what Paul considered a form of slavery, abandoning the sonship that was theirs through Christ.

So, in this letter to them, Paul appeals to them to return to the original gospel by reminding them: Do you remember what it was like when you were slaves. Was that a desirable existence? As slaves, you had no future; your destiny was to serve at the master's pleasure until you died. He could snap his fingers and you would be disposed of like a dog whom a master has tired of owning. Slavery is having no freedom and no control over what happens to you. Slavery is having no goal to your life, nothing that you hope to accomplish before the end. There is nothing toward which you push forward, no finish line toward which you strain. It is just daily drudgery, serving at the Master's command, with no future. It is following orders but with no victory ever possible. Do you really want that?

Have any of you ever been there? Hopeless? Feeling that any future had been taken from you? That's what slavery feels like! Would you rather not have this gift of freedom that God offers you, God, who, in His

own good time, sent Jesus to be the sacrifice for you, and for all, men and women, Jews and non-Jews, free and slaves, and freed you and graced you with spiritual riches beyond your imagination? Were you not thrilled to be released? Were you not thrilled to contemplate for the first time in your lives what you could actually do and achieve? As sons, you began to share in the Father's land, with all the rights, privileges, and benefits that that inheritance entitles you to: why would you become slaves again? Why would you abandon the greatest hope for something that is no hope at all???

Paul doesn't say so, but I would suggest to you that the reason people sell themselves back into slavery after they have tasted freedom is because those preachers who came to Galatia after Paul had left played on the fears of the people. You know freedom is a scary thing, especially if you've never had it. It's like light to someone who has been blind from birth. When freedom was offered to slaves in the US South during the Civil War, many of them chose to remain right on the plantations where they had worked and often been mistreated. They were fearful of going elsewhere, of facing the unknown.

In fact, even today it is really quite attractive. There are even political parties, like the preachers that came to Galatia after Paul, who devote their energies to telling people how much better off they'd be if they would just become slaves again and receive their guarantees that if they just let this politician or this party govern for them they will never have to think for themselves or be neglected in any area of their lives.

But, Paul pleaded with the Galatians: do not give up your freedom; hold on to your sonship, which guarantees your freedom. Otherwise, you will never have the right to run in the race. True, as a slave you can never lose the race, but that's only because others will be running it while you are left back working the fields while the sons go off to the games. You will never have the feeling of the son who awakes every morning, knowing that this is all yours, that all the riches of the land and of the storehouses of the Father are yours, through Christ. You will not awake every morning knowing that there are new adventures and areas of this land to explore. Working in the field, you will only hear the cheers on a far, far distant mountainside, and wonder what all the excitement is about.

Conclusion

My friends, all of us here resemble in more ways than we realize those people in Galatia to whom Paul spoke. None of us is "born to the manor". Christ alone deserves to be called "son of God". God owed us nothing.

But, in Christ, you and I, like all of that motley crew in Galatia, are offered the opportunity to be called "sons" by God the Father Himself. Amazingly, you and I who naturally are born to slavery to Law, or flesh, or death, or Satan, to a life of chains, are offered the right to the inheritance of the Son of God, including the right to run in the race. All of us, young and old, male and female, slave and free, are offered the unimaginable: the right to be true Olympic athletes.

Some years ago I was asked to take the funeral of a member of my parish. This man was also our neighbour. We had gotten to know him quite well over the years. He was a relatively younger old man, but his body was crippled with arthritis. His walk showed it. He couldn't shake hands because his fingers were so scrunched up with arthritis.

At his funeral, I began my sermon: “How many of you know that Art was an Olympic athlete?” There was an audible gasp. People turned to each other and you could see them saying: “I never knew that. Is that the truth?” And so I said: “But, he was not an athlete who went for gold that would perish. He went for the gold that would endure forever.”

The Greeks praised their heroes, the free citizens of Greece. The world today watches its champions of physical prowess and marvels. But the true heroes, the true champions, are those unlikely men and women who heard the gospel that Paul preached and believed. For to them was given not the most illustrious human spirit imaginable, but the unimaginable itself, the very Spirit of God, so that they could run the race for the gold that would not perish.

Do you want it? Or is slavery good enough for you?

Epilogue

Before you answer, there is one more thing that you should know.

In the worlds of Greece and Rome, the worlds to which Paul addresses himself, to be a son, a free citizen, did not just mean inheriting land and wealth and participating in races that were some sort of abstract sporting event. The greatest goal of any free citizen, and in fact the purpose of the Olympic games in the first place, was to prepare the young men, the sons, for war.

For you see, in Greece and Rome, only sons were soldiers. Not women, and not slaves. Only free men, citizens, can fight to defend a free land. You cannot get others to do it for you. This is fundamentally different from the Eastern kingdoms and from Islam, where slaves comprise the front lines of every warring army. Slaves, in these armies, are very useful... as cattle, as cannon-fodder, to slow down the oncoming army.

But, in Greece and Rome, the army was originally an army of the free. Only sons served; slaves stayed at home, with the women, and prepared for the sons' return. The greatest honour, the glory, of any son was to serve in battle, defending his land and his possessions against enemies. To be a soldier, that was ultimately what it meant to be a son.

Not to be able to run in the race would be a great disgrace, because it would make it impossible to fight in what might just be the greatest battle of all time, a battle that, if lost, would mean that all who are free would become slaves.

So, now that you know this, the question seems more likely: who in their right mind would want to be a son, when staying out of trouble, and keeping the home fires burning, would be a whole lot safer?

Paul knew his world. And he chose his imagery intentionally. He is not just talking about sons and slaves to entice the Galatians back to the Gospel by telling them about the benefits of being a son, but also by reminding them of the responsibilities of being a son, namely, to fight as citizens for their land.

For Paul, there is indeed a battle shaping up and it will have to be fought by someone, otherwise we shall all become slaves again, be it slaves of the law, or of flesh, or of death, or of Satan.

And who can fight this battle? Only those who can run the race.

And who can run the race? Only sons.

And who are the sons? Those men and women, Jews and non-Jews, slaves and free who have all been made free, made sons, that motley crew that is made heroes through Jesus Christ's death on the cross.

So, Paul says to them, and to us: remain free, not just to enjoy freedom, but to engage heroically in this battle that is coming.

And remember: because this is a battle unlike any other, so the weapons of this war will be different. Rather than swords and spears, rifles and bombs, tools of man's making and strategies of man's devising, they will be the Word of God, righteous character, wise judgment, speaking the truth in all boldness and yet with love, ... tools that God alone can equip you with and strategies known only to the Spirit.

Next week, I want to continue to explore this question by looking a bit at one of the greatest preparatory battle speeches in the Bible, one of the greatest calls to the sons of God to make ready for battle with the tools that God will supply us with. I want to look with you next week at what I call the great "battle cry of freedom", the summons to the sons of God to shoulder their responsibilities, as sons of God, in the true fight for true freedom.

ⁱ Veyne, Paul, ed. From Pagan Rome to Byzantium. Gen. ed. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1987. Vol. 1 of A History of Private Life. 52.