



# Running the Race

Leader's Notes and Bible Passages

By Shari Miller

*(Please do NOT use the "if time permits" sections when your study session time is limited. These sections could possibly be done by the participant in private before or after the study.)*

*(Leaders and participants are encouraged to look up Bible passages for most effective study. Passages are printed below for ease in presentation.)*

"Ready, set, go!" You might recognize these words if you have ever attended a track meet and watched the runners strive to win the race. Discuss with a partner or your small group what message you think these words convey to each runner.

**Answers will vary, but encourage everyone to share. Make it clear that everything confided within the group stays within the group. The leader should start to begin discussion.**

In 1 Corinthians 9:24, Paul uses racing language, *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.* He tells Timothy toward his life's end: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith* (2 Timothy 4:7). Our focus will be on the Apostle Paul (Saul) and how God made him ready to serve the Lord, set him on the right path of faith, and blessed that service as he shared the Good News about Jesus as Savior of the entire world — to Jews and Gentiles alike. We will also look at how our loving Lord prepares *us* for joyful service to Him and blesses us as we go and tell those in our lives about our Savior and all He has done for us.

**Opening Prayer:** Dear heavenly Father, You created us and have given us many talents and abilities. Unfortunately, we are sinful and our sin separates us from You. Our Savior Jesus came to live a perfect life, suffer, die for our sins, and rise from the dead. Because of Him, we come to You asking for forgiveness for the times we have failed You. Thank You for giving us the Holy Spirit Who gives us faith in Jesus, readies us for the race, sets our path through Word and Sacraments, and spurs us to go and run the race as witnesses to all that Jesus has done for us. Help us to keep our eyes on the prize of eternal life. In Jesus' name we boldly pray. Amen.

## Ready.

The Apostle Paul was the first missionary to the Gentiles, preaching and teaching the Good News about salvation in Jesus to those living in the darkness of their sins during three missionary journeys. He wrote many letters of doctrine and encouragement to church plants in such cities as Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae. God made Paul ready for the awesome task of being His missionary. Read the following references to Paul's background and identify some of the things that we learn about Paul's early life, qualifications, and characteristics.

**Acts 22:1–5 could speak in Hebrew, as well as Greek; a Jew; educated in Jewish law in Jerusalem by Gamaliel; zealous for God**

**<sup>1</sup>"Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you." <sup>2</sup>And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language [NIV Aramaic], they became even more quiet. And he said: <sup>3</sup>"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city [Jerusalem], educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. <sup>4</sup>I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, <sup>5</sup>as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.**

**Acts 22:27–28 a Roman citizen by birth (because he was born in Tarsus, a "free-city" of Rome)**

**<sup>27</sup>So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes." <sup>28</sup>The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth."**

### Acts 23:6 a Pharisee

<sup>6</sup> Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial."

**Romans 11:1 an Israelite; descendant of Abraham; tribe of Benjamin**

<sup>1</sup>I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

**Galatians 1:14 zealous for traditions of fathers; advancing in Judaism earlier than most his age**

<sup>14</sup> And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

**Philippians 3:5–6 circumcised; Israelite (tribe of Benjamin); Hebrew; Pharisee; zealously persecuted the church; blameless in knowledge of and in keeping the Pharisaical laws**

<sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

How did these qualifications and characteristics of Paul help to prepare him for later service to the Lord?

Be specific. **Answers will vary, but encourage everyone to share. Answers may include: because Paul was a Jew and knowledgeable of their traditions and laws, he could use that knowledge to show how Jesus came to fulfill God's Law; because he could speak Hebrew, the text says the Jews were "more quiet" and paid better attention to what he was saying; he was one of them with the same lineage and history; he was a Roman citizen by virtue of his birth in Tarsus — a fact which would enable him in later years to appeal his "case" directly to Caesar in Rome; he was zealous, even at a young age — as zealous as he was for persecuting the church, God used this zealous characteristic from the Spirit to help grow the church, take three missionary trips, and minister to the Gentiles; because he was young, he could give more years in service to the Lord.**

In Acts 7:54–8:3, we read about the stoning of the martyr Stephen, *a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit* (Acts 6:5). Who was present and approved of this stoning? **Saul (later Paul)** What do we learn about Paul/Saul in these passages (see again Galatians 1:14)?

**After he witnessed and approved Stephen's stoning, he began to zealously persecute and ravage the church; he took men and women from their houses, and sent them to prison.**

<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

<sup>1</sup>And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

**Faith Talk:** Make a list of at least five characteristics and/or qualifications that God has given to you.

How have these qualifications/characteristics helped to get you ready for your service to the Lord? Share with a partner or your small group. **Answers will vary, but encourage everyone to share.**

### Set.

Saul was zealous in defense of the knowledge and faith he had in his erroneous Pharisaical beliefs. He was confident that he was on the true course as he delivered Christians to prison to be persecuted and killed. Read Acts 9:1–22. How did God set Saul on the correct path to becoming His missionary? **Discuss Saul/Paul's conversion as detailed in the text.**

<sup>1</sup>But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" <sup>5</sup> And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice

but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. <sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." <sup>11</sup> And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. <sup>16</sup> For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." <sup>17</sup> So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; <sup>19</sup> and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

Paul was baptized and *filled with the Holy Spirit* (Acts 16:9). His path and destination were determined by His Lord and Savior. Read **Acts 9:20–30** for the rest of the story. How long did it take for Paul to begin witnessing about Jesus as Savior? **Immediately!** What obstacles did he face? **The Jews did not trust him and even plotted to kill him because he was preaching that Jesus was the Christ; the early church did not trust or believe him because of his apparently quick conversion; the Greek Jews (Hellenists) sought to kill him.**

<sup>20</sup> And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." <sup>21</sup> And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" <sup>22</sup> But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. <sup>23</sup> When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, <sup>24</sup> but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, <sup>25</sup> but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. <sup>26</sup> And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup> So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. <sup>29</sup> And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. <sup>30</sup> And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Read **Hebrews 12:1–2**. To what is the Christian's life compared? **running a race** How do Christians *run the race*? **Throw off the weight of sin; stay on the set course; focus on Jesus.** Who is the Christian's "coach" for the race? **Jesus** What encouragement does Jesus give? **He completed His atoning work, dying on the cross for us; we are forgiven in His name; He is beside us and before us as we run the race; His Spirit guides us.**

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

According to **Romans 6:3–4**, when and how is every Christian's path set by God? **Baptism**

<sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

At our Baptism, we are filled with the Holy Spirit, who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and strengthens the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" (Luther's Small Catechism, explanation to the Third Article). How does the Spirit work in the lives of Christ's people to keep them focused and set with their eyes fixed on Jesus? See **1 Corinthians 1:18; 11:23–26**. **Through the Means of Grace: Word — it is the power of God; the Sacraments — Baptism as mentioned above, and the Lord's Supper.**

<sup>18</sup> For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup> In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of

me.”<sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

**Faith Talk:** Share with a partner or the small group how you remain in God’s Word and the path of faith He has given and set for you. Brainstorm together additional ways you can remain in God’s Word.

**Answers will vary, but encourage everyone to share.**

**Faith Talk:** When were you baptized? Do you know someone who has yet to be baptized? How could you share the importance of Baptism as you witness your faith in the Savior Jesus? Share with a partner or the small group. **Answers will vary, but encourage everyone to share.**

## Go!

Read a portion of Paul’s own account of his conversion in **Acts 26:15–18**. What did the Lord ask Paul to do? **Become a servant and witness of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord to the Jews and Gentiles, so that they may turn from darkness to light, receive forgiveness of sins, and become God’s children by faith.**<sup>15</sup> And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.<sup>16</sup> But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you,<sup>17</sup> delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you<sup>18</sup> to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’’

Read more of Paul’s story in **Acts 26:19–23**. Describe how Paul did what the Lord asked him to go and do. **He preached the Word and Christ crucified to both Jews and Gentiles.**

<sup>19</sup> ‘‘Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,<sup>20</sup> but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.<sup>21</sup> For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.<sup>22</sup> To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass:<sup>23</sup> that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.’’

**If time permits:** Imagine being a devout Jew in Paul’s day hearing his message about proclaiming Christ to the Gentiles. How might this have made you feel? **Answers will vary, but encourage everyone to share.**

The task that God asked of Paul was not always easy to do. List some of the hardships Paul endured for the sake of the Gospel in **2 Corinthians 11:23–28**. **Answers could include: whipped five times; beaten with rods three times; stoned once; shipwrecked three times; adrift at sea for 24 hours; frequent journeys; dangers from rivers, robbers, Jews, Gentiles; dangers in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, from false brothers; toil and hardship; sleeplessness; hunger and thirst; cold and exposure; anxiety for fellow Christians.**

<sup>23</sup> **Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.**<sup>24</sup> Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.<sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;<sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;<sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.<sup>28</sup> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Read **Romans 5:1–5**. What does God promise His witnessing people even in the midst of trials and suffering? **We have peace with God through Christ; we can rejoice even in our sufferings which produce endurance, character, and hope of eternal life; He gives us His own love and Spirit.**

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.<sup>3</sup> Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,<sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,<sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

See **Mark 5:18–20** and **Acts 1:8**. What does the Lord send *these* people to go and boldly do by the power and do by the power of the Spirit? What is the plan for witnessing that Jesus gave His audience? In both cases, what might we learn in our witnessing today? **Witness to what the Lord has done for us; His great mercy and love.** What is the master plan for witnessing that Jesus gives us? **Witnessing should start at home; spread out to surrounding neighborhoods; and eventually into the whole world.**  
**Mark 5:18-20:** <sup>18</sup> As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him [Jesus] that he might be with him. <sup>19</sup> And he did not permit him but said to him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." <sup>20</sup> And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.  
**Acts 2:8:** <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Because of Christ's perfect life, suffering, death, and resurrection and for His sake, what prize awaits the Christian runner at the end of life's race? See **1 Corinthians 9:24–25**, **Philippians 3:20–21**, and **2 Timothy 4:6–8**. **An imperishable wreath; citizenship in heaven; a crown of righteousness; eternal life!**  
**1 Corinthians 9:24–27:** <sup>24</sup> Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. <sup>25</sup> Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.  
**Philippians 3:20–21:** <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.  
**2 Timothy 4:6–8:** <sup>6</sup> For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup> Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

***Faith Walk:***

1. Thank God *who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Corinthians 15:57).
2. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you run the race and keep the faith.
3. Witness your faith in Jesus to family and friends.
4. Do additional study about the Apostle Paul.
5. Praise the Lord daily for the gifts He has given to you, especially His joy as we run the race.

***Closing Prayer:*** Speak or sing the words of "Fight the Good Fight" (*LSB #664; LW #299; TLH #447*).

***Blessing:*** (speak 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17 to one another)

*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.*  
Amen.

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