

I WISH THE PREACHER WOULD TALK ABOUT? *What Are We Running From?*

Philippians 3:1-14

August 9, 2026

This morning, before your alarm even went off, the voice was there. You know the one. It insists you're already behind before your feet hit the floor because somewhere somebody woke up earlier than you and got a head start. And so, you reach for that little window, the one that sits on the nightstand, the one that holds the life you're supposed to be living. Your job for the rest of the day is to catch up.

Because the voice, the one that woke you, is just getting started. And it will demand more. It will say, "Go faster. Work harder. Keep up." The finish line will keep moving so that it is always just out of reach.

I do not think I'm the only one who wakes under the weight of these persistent questions: Am I falling behind? Am I doing enough? Am I enough?

I don't think I'm the only one, because here's what I keep noticing. We are all running. We're running to prove ourselves. To secure the future. To get our kids on track. To keep our fears at arm's length. This summer, one of you put it to me with vulnerable honesty: "I feel like a hamster on a wheel. I'm always busy but sometimes wonder what any of it is for." When people tell me they're tired, I don't think they're talking about their sleep schedule. What I hear is a weariness beyond physical fatigue.

Maybe you wish the preacher would talk about what our faith says to those who can't stop, who can't quit comparing, competing, climbing. Maybe you wish the preacher would ask, "What, exactly, are we chasing? What are we running *from*?"

Now, I love to run. I love the discipline of it, the joy of discovering deeper capacities over time. I believe that God made a world where effort bears fruit and brings fulfillment, but I also know how quickly a gift becomes a god. My watch tracks my pace, scores my sleep, ranks every single one of my runs against the last one, and even will predict my future times. Here's what happens. I've noticed. I finish a run, and I'm feeling good. I'm fueled by the exertion and the endorphins. But the performance rating device on my wrist instructs me otherwise. Ten seconds slower than yesterday. Not

enough sleep. Training regimen off. The joy is swallowed by a series of metrics. I trust that I am not alone.

In fact, I know I am not alone because we have become a society of scorekeepers. We start so young. My nine-year-old can tell you where he ranks among the fastest boys in fourth grade. This week, the children we love return to school with new shoes and very familiar fears. How do I measure up?

The first lie ever told in the garden was that we could be like God, needing no one, beating everyone. And deep down, I think we still want to believe it. Far below the hustle and the grind we are running from our own fragility. We are outpacing the truth that we did not make ourselves and cannot save ourselves.

Sometimes I worry that these days we don't live our lives so much as we measure them. Perhaps you've noted that the scoreboard never sleeps. It keeps finding new frontiers. Young men optimize their jawlines and their testosterone. We curate every pixel for perfection. Some spend fortunes tracking biomarkers to reverse the aging process. They are literally trying not to die.

But these are only the most visible versions of what the rest of us do in more subtle ways, the ways we sprint to outpace dependence, weakness, and failure. We all have a scoreboard. Maybe it's a peer's professional promotion, or a friend's vacation photos, or a neighbor's landscaped lawn. And just like that, you're behind again.

This compulsion to compete does not just wear us out, it steals our devotion. We're too consumed with comparison to see the person God set right in front of us. Maybe it's the child who gave up waiting to show us their project, or the friend who finally stopped reaching out, or the partner who no longer tries to connect. Too often we miss the life we've been given by seeking a better model.

Earlier this spring the columnist Jessica Grose caught herself in this trap and then wrote an essay about it. The essay is titled "Visible Abs and the Millennial Midlife Crisis." Grose is sweating on a treadmill, eyes locked on a leaderboard tracking her heart rate, sneaking a peek at her neighbor's machine to be sure she was going a

little faster, when the questions finally caught up to her right there in Orange Theory. *What am I running from? What void am I trying to fill?*

Long before fitness trackers, corporate ladders, and Instagram feeds, a man named Paul knew what it was to live by the scoreboard. His was religious, and for a long time he thought he was winning. He *knew* he was winning. Writing from a prison cell to the Philippians, he pulls out his résumé, his scorecard. Circumcised on the eighth day. A Hebrew of Hebrews. A teacher of the law. Righteous. Blameless. A transcript nobody could touch. You might say that Paul's LinkedIn profile was the envy of the ancient world.

By every metric of the culture, he had already won. And yet he writes: *whatever gains I had, I count as loss.*

To describe his achievements, Paul uses the Greek word *skubalon*. It's the only time in the whole New Testament that this word appears, and you might have noticed that your Bible politely translates the word *rubbish*. Paul didn't call his achievements *rubbish*. He chose the word for what you scrape off the bottom of your sandal. Those achievements were not evil, but they belonged to a race he was no longer running. They were no longer of any use to him. Next to the grace that had found him, his perfect profile was a pile of...you get it.

When he met Paul, Jesus did not update his scoreboard. He shattered it.

Notice what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't urge the Philippians to stop running. And he never says he's going to stop. The man who just called his résumé *skubalon* does not retire altogether because the running was never the problem. The problem is the scoreboard we keep watching. That's what steals the joy—the metrics, not the running.

So here is the whole hinge of the passage: *I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* When grace finds you, you no longer strive to earn belonging. You run hard because you already belong. Known before you succeed. Claimed before you're optimized. Loved before you have anything to offer.

I have been a pastor for nearly two decades and have led many services for those whose time on earth has ended. Can you guess how many eulogies are spent summarizing the scoreboard or recapping the résumé? What always comes up is what has always mattered most. Who we love, and who loved us back. The chances we took to serve. The faith that gave us meaning and purpose and peace. I think the tragedy of so many lives is that they are spent chasing the very things that will evaporate first when the race has finally

ended and the story is told.

Skubalon. It's no way to build a life.

So, what are we running from? We may think it's failure, or irrelevance, or falling behind. But here's the truth. We've been running from the One who has already caught us. Paul puts it plainly. He writes that Christ has seized him. Christ has gotten a hold of him. Which is exactly what was required. For Paul and for us.

The gospel does not declare that you finally ran fast or far enough to catch up to God. The gospel is that God ran all the way to you. Jesus does not stand at the finish line with a stopwatch. Jesus overtakes you. Jesus seizes you. Gets a hold of you. When you had nothing left but your need, when you were face down in the dirt on the road to Damascus, he gave you a name you could never earn.

Beloved.

Paul did not lose the race. He was found by a truth that made the race look so small. Too small. The surpassing value of knowing Christ. Paul did not stop striving. He found something worth pressing toward.

This is what a world built on scorekeeping will never get about grace. The world assumes we who embrace the gift of God have given up. You've heard the words. Gone soft. Quit the game. Worship weakness. They'll call you naive, or quaint, or a waste. Because a people who won't keep score are an offense to the whole arrangement.

Good. Just let them be offended. We will be faithful to the One who has taken hold of us. Do not mistake our allegiance for surrender. We simply belong to a different kingdom, where the scoreboard stopped working a long time ago. We set down the relentless comparison and take up a different race, one measured not by who's ahead, but by how we love and who we serve.

That's still running. Don't be fooled. Grace does not put you on the couch. It puts you on the road. Look at Paul, face down outside Damascus, everything he'd spent a lifetime building lying in pieces all around him. His absolute certainty. His sterling résumé. His airtight righteousness. But he didn't stay face down in the road. He got up. He had less. He had everything. He had Christ.

Not loss but joy. He bore the lightness of a man who had nothing left to carry and everything to run for. He spent the rest of his life reaching, pushing, pressing, and striving, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. He stopped running from something and started running to someone.

So, tomorrow morning, when the metrics return with your rank, your review, your score, here's what pressing on looks like: you show up where you're needed. You work hard for what matters. You care deeply for those God gives you. And you love generously because God loves generously. But don't run the numbers to find out if you've succeeded. You already know.

Run because you are free. Run because you can. Run because you are his. When the voice insists you're behind, or you aren't enough, or you need to run harder, listen for a deeper truth from another voice. The one that spoke at your baptism. The one that stopped Paul on the road and gave him his life back. It is speaking to you now:

Beloved, you are mine. You have nothing to prove. So run.
Amen