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## FINISHING WELL

2 Timothy 4:6-8

By

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2 Timothy Lesson 20

## Finishing Well 2 Timothy 4:6-8

A man was trying hypnosis to help him quit smoking. His friend asked whether he thought it would work. "Sure," he said, "it worked the last time I tried it!" Let's face it: starting well is relatively easy. Finishing well is a different matter! Starting that new diet or exercise program is kind of fun, but hanging in over the long haul is the real test. Getting married is exciting and relatively easy. Staying married through the struggles, adjustments, and trials is not always an easy matter.

The same is true of the Christian life. Becoming a Christian is relatively easy: acknowledge to God that you are a sinner and receive by faith the free gift of eternal life that Christ provided by His shed blood. You cannot work for salvation nor do anything to qualify for it. God gives it freely to all that recognize their need and trust in Christ alone.

But then comes the hard part—hanging in there as a Christian in a world that is hostile towards God and His people. The world constantly dangles in front of you all that it has to offer in opposition to the things of God. From within, the flesh entices you to forsake Christ and gratify your sinful desires. The enemy hits you with temptation after temptation. The real test of your faith is, will you endure? Genuine faith in Christ perseveres to the finish line.

The Christian life is a marathon, not a 100-yard dash. Since finishing a marathon well is not easy, when you see a man who sprints across the finish line, you ought to try to find out his secret. The apostle Paul was such a man. It's as if he has crossed the finish line with energy to spare. He jogs back to where Timothy seems to be losing steam and exhorts him to keep running well. In our text, it is clear that Paul is looking death in the face. His words must have caused Timothy to burst into tears when he first read them. And, these words must have sobered Timothy with the reality that Paul had handed off the baton to him. Now, he had to finish well.

Paul's words are not those of a discouraged, broken old man. There is no despair, no defeat, no cynicism, and no fear as he faces

imminent execution. His calm assurance is all the more startling when you consider his circumstances. He was in the Mamertine Prison in Rome. Even the worst of our prisons today would be like the Hilton in comparison to the Mamertine. Paul's cell was a dark, damp dungeon, reached only by a rope or ladder from a hole in the floor above. He had no windows, no lights, no toilet, no furniture, and no running water.

As Paul sat on the hard floor in the cold darkness, enduring the stench of his own urine and excrement, the circumstances outside were not encouraging. Many seemed to be turning away from the aged apostle, and even from the faith, following false teachers. Paul had labored for the past thirty years or more to preach the gospel around the Roman Empire, but at this point, it was at best a tiny sect, scattered here and there. Paul was not the world-famous apostle, appearing on TV talk shows, autographing books, with invitations pouring in from around the world for him to speak.

And yet, the man was clearly at rest, confident in the way he has spent his life, and calmly assured as he faces death by decapitation. What does the apostle have to teach us about finishing well? Note that verse 6 speaks about Paul's present: "I am." Verse 7 refers to his past: "I have." Verse 8 begins, "In the future..."

To finish well, keep in focus Paul's view of the present,  
the past, and the future.

1. To finish well, keep in focus Paul's view of the present (4:6).

Three key words here will help us finish well: reproduction, sacrifice, and departure.

- A. **Reproduction:** Paul could finish well because he had reproduced himself in others.

In the Greek text, verse 6 begins with the emphatic pronoun "I," which contrasts with the "you" of verse 5, along with the connective "for." The flow of thought is this: "Timothy, you preach the Word even in the face of opposition, because I am about to die. I'm handing you the torch to carry!"

Dying is easier when you know that you're leaving behind a number of people who can carry on with Christ because of your

influence. Each of us needs to ask ourselves, "Am I working on that task?" I am talking about obeying Jesus' Great Commission, to make disciples of others. That Commission applies to every Christian at some level. If you know Christ as Savior and are walking with Him, then He calls you to make disciples of others.

You can begin at home. Every Christian parent ought to be waging an all-out campaign to train up his or her children to know Christ and walk with Him. It doesn't happen by accident. It begins by setting the example: you must walk in reality with Jesus Christ if you want to impart that to your kids. Beyond that, dads, are you taking the time to read the Bible and pray with your family? Are you making sure that your family gathers with the Lord's people on the Lord's day for worship and teaching? Do you talk openly at home about spiritual things? Do you apply God's Word when there are tensions or trials on the home front?

Beyond your immediate family, you ought to have a vision for reproducing yourself in the lives of others. Godly men should be handing off the faith to younger men in the faith (2 Tim. 2:2). Godly women should be training younger women in the things of God (Titus 2:3-5). When you're gone, there should be others who will carry on with Christ because of your influence.

B. Sacrifice: Paul could finish well because he viewed his life as an offering to God.

Paul did not view his execution as a cruel tragedy or as unfair treatment in view of his many years of dedicated service. Rather, he saw it as the culminating offering of a sacrificial life. After the sacrificial lamb had been placed on the altar, and just before it was lit on fire, the priest poured out on it about a quart of wine (Num. 28:7). It was the final sacrifice poured out on the existing sacrifice. That was how Paul viewed his own death. His whole life had been a living sacrifice presented unto God. Now, his death would be the drink offering poured on top of that (Phil. 2:17).

This means that to finish well, you need to view all of your life as an act of sacrificial worship to God. As Paul put it (Rom. 12:1), "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." You don't serve Christ in order

to get praise and acclaim from others. You serve Christ as an act of worship towards Him. If others turn away from you or badmouth you (as they were doing toward Paul), or if your earthly reward for a lifetime of dedicated service is to get your head cut off, it's okay, because all of your life has been an offering to God.

This also means that to finish well, you view yourself as expendable in God's service. Here is the great apostle to the Gentiles, the man who did more for the spread of the gospel than any other man in church history. His influence was incalculable. Yet he could finish well because he saw himself as expendable, a drink offering. In language similar to our text, Paul told the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:24), "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God." If you have inflated notions of your own importance, you will not finish well. All of us should view ourselves and all of our service as a sacrificial offering to God.

C. Departure: Paul could finish well because he viewed his impending death as a departure.

"The time of my departure has come" (4:6). In the Bible, death is never cessation of existence, but rather, a separation of the soul from the body. It is departure. The Greek word that Paul used was a vivid one. It was used to describe the unyoking of an animal from a plow or cart. Death means the end of our labors and toils in this life. It was also used for loosening the bonds of a prisoner. Death is a release from the bonds of this corruptible body. It was also used for loosening the ropes of a soldier's tent. This suggests that at death, the battle is over, victory is won, and we are headed home. The word was also used for loosening the mooring ropes of a ship. At death our earthly ship leaves the shores of this stormy earth and puts in at the always-calm port of heaven. (These examples are in William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* [Westminster Press], revised edition, p. 209.)

If you have Paul's view of death as departure, you will be able to finish without fear and even with anticipation, knowing that to depart and be with Christ is much better (Phil. 1:23). You will be able to say with him (Phil. 1:21), "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." So to finish well, keep in focus Paul's view of the pres-

ent: present ministry is reproduction; present life is a sacrifice to God; and, impending death is a departure to be with Christ.

2. To finish well, keep in focus Paul's view of the past (4:7).

Paul was able to look back on his past in Christ and say confidently that he had done well. He is not implying that there had not been mistakes or times of discouragement—of course there had been. But through all of the problems and trials, Paul had stayed in the race. He could say, "I've done what God called me to do!" To be able to join Paul in saying that at the end of our lives, we must be able to make his three statements in verse 7:

A. "I have fought the good fight" (4:7a).

When you come to the end of your life, will you be able to look back and say, "I have been involved in the struggle for the cause of Christ"? Paul is using an athletic metaphor, either of a wrestling match or a race. It conveys that the Christian life is not a Sunday School picnic, but rather, a struggle against the forces of evil. It is not just any fight, but the *good* fight, the fight of the gospel of Jesus Christ for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Can you say, "I am currently involved in the struggle for the cause of Christ?" Let me help you answer that question. You cannot say so if you are living primarily for your own comfort and affluence, spending your time and money on your pursuit of the American dream. You may attend church every week. You may profess to know Christ as your Savior. But if your purpose in life is to be as comfortable and affluent as you can be, then you are not seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. You're not involved in the struggle for the cause of Christ.

If, on the other hand, you live for the purpose of building up the body of Christ and extending His kingdom through your labors, your time, and your money, in accordance with the gifts and opportunities that God has given you, then you are involved in that struggle. What a fulfilling thing when it comes time to die, to look back on your past and be able to say, "I've been involved in that great struggle for the cause of Christ!"

B. "I have finished the course" (4:7b).

"I have not dropped out of the race." Paul is referring to a long race. The word "marathon" comes from a geographic place where a decisive battle took place between Greece and Persia in 490 B.C. If the Persians had won, world history would have been much different. The glories of ancient Greece would not have happened. The legend is that after the battle, a Greek soldier ran the distance from Marathon to Athens (21-25 miles, depending on his route) with the news of the victory, and then fell dead. Based on that legend, the modern marathon race began between Marathon and Athens in the 1896 Olympics, and was lengthened to the present 26.2 miles in the 1908 Olympics.

We all know those who began the Christian life with a flourish of activity and enthusiasm. Maybe they even went into full-time ministry. But when trials and disappointments hit, they dropped out. Sometimes, we need to take a break from serving to be refreshed and renewed. But then we need to get back in the race. Of course, we never should take a break from walking with the Lord.

I've never ran a marathon, but I know that there's no such thing as an easy marathon. We need to get out of our heads that the Christian life is all glory and effortless bliss. There is joy, but there also are many trials that require endurance (Acts 14:22). So make up your mind to hang in with the Lord through the tough times, so that you can look back at the end and say with Paul, "I have finished the course."

C. "I have kept the faith" (4:7c).

"I have guarded the truth about Christ." Several times in these letters to Timothy, Paul has talked about "the deposit" that Timothy is to guard (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:12, 14). He was referring to the truth of the gospel, the core doctrines of the Christian faith. When Paul says that he has kept the faith, he means that he has carefully guarded the truth about Jesus Christ that God had entrusted to him. He had not bought into any of the many errors about Christ that were circulating in his day. His life and his teaching had held to sound doctrine.

You can't keep a faith that you are unclear about. To be able to look back on your life and echo Paul's words, "I have kept the faith," you need to be clear on the essentials of that faith. It is just

as much under attack in our day as it was in Paul's day. So sink down some roots in sound doctrine. Know what you believe so that you are not tossed around by all of the winds of false doctrine.

Thus Paul could finish well because he could look at his present: he saw his present ministry as reproduction, his present life as a sacrifice, and his impending death as departure. He could look at his past: he saw that he had been involved in the struggle for the cause of Christ, he had not dropped out of the race, and he had guarded the truth of the gospel. But he also looked to the future:

3. To finish well, keep in focus Paul's view of the future (4:8).

Paul could finish well in spite of his dismal circumstances because he had secure hope for the future. There are two aspects of Paul's future hope:

- A. Paul could finish well because he hoped to meet the Lord, the righteous Judge.

You may think that that sounds more like dread than hope! While there ought to be an element of awe and fear when we think of standing before the Lord, the prevailing emotion that we should have is expectant hope. The world, if they even think about standing before the righteous Judge, should be filled with dread. But Christians should love His appearing. Here's why: Paul wrote (Rom. 8:1), "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Jesus said (John 5:24) that the one who believes in Him "does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life." Salvation is God's free gift given by His grace apart from any merit on our part. If your trust is in Jesus Christ as Savior, you do not need to fear the final judgment.

The reason that you will not be condemned on judgment day is not because you have earned it by being a good person. Rather, it is that by His death on the cross, Jesus Christ satisfied God's perfect righteousness. When you trusted in Him, God imputed Christ's righteousness to your account (Rom. 3:21-26). That hope of meeting the Lord, the righteous Judge, who will welcome us into heaven on the basis of His perfect righteousness, should help us now to run the race with endurance.

- B. Paul could finish well because he lived in view of *that day*.

It is difficult to interpret what Paul means by “the crown of righteousness.” Is this a special reward given only to some believers who have lived especially righteous lives, but not to all? Or, is it the reward of eternal righteousness, given to all believers, who have already been justified by faith?

In favor of the view that it is a special reward is that the word “crown” refers to the wreath that was given to the victor in the games. Not all received this crown, but only those who won (1 Cor. 9:24-25; 2 Tim. 2:5). The Bible teaches that while salvation is a free gift, God will reward us on the basis of our service for Him (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10), and these rewards will differ among believers. Some will have their works burned up, because they were not founded upon Christ, but they will be saved yet so as through fire. Others will receive a reward for their works (1 Cor.3: 10-15).

In favor of the view that the crown of righteousness is given to all believers is that the phrase, “all who have loved His appearing,” seems to be a description of all believers. In this sense, it would be parallel to the crown of life that is given to all who love Christ (James 1:12). If Christ has saved you by shedding His blood for your sins, you long for the day when you will see Him.

Perhaps Paul’s meaning here is simply that even though his earthly judge (the evil Nero) had wrongly condemned him, he knew that the righteous Judge would vindicate him when he stood before Him. This is the third time that Paul has used “that day” in this letter (1:12, 18). Clearly, he lived in view of that day, when he would stand before Christ. So should we. The fact that we will stand before the Lord, the righteous Judge, on *that day* should motivate us to live righteously on *this day*.

I read of a journalist who was in charge of the obituaries. One day when he didn’t have any deaths to record, he put a sheet of blank paper in his typewriter and wrote his own name at the top. He then found himself writing his own obituary: “I have been a good husband and a fine father. I have contributed to a number of worthy causes. I have left a reputation of absolute integrity. My friends are many.” By the time he had finished the page, he had already committed himself to the task of living up to his own obituary (told by Robert Mounce, *Pass it On* [Regal Books], p. 153).

## Conclusion

Perhaps your circumstances seem pretty dismal today. Maybe you're considering dropping out of the Christian race. From his dungeon, the aged apostle calls out to you: "Don't quit! Keep going! You can finish well!

"Keep in focus my view of the present: You can reproduce yourself in others to carry the torch after you. View your life as a sacrifice to God. Your death will be a departure to be with Christ.

"Keep in focus my view of the past, so that one day it will be your past. You will be able to look back and say that you engaged in the struggle for the cause of Christ. You didn't drop out of the race! You guarded the truth of the gospel.

"Keep in focus my view of the future. Soon you will stand before the Lord, the righteous Judge, vindicated by His grace. Live in view of *that day!*" If you live with Paul's focus, you will finish well!

## Application Questions

1. With whom are you currently trying to reproduce yourself? If the answer is "no one," ask God to direct you to someone.
2. Does the idea of departing to be with Christ cause you more fear or peace? If fear, how can you change this?
3. When do you most feel like dropping out of the race? What encourages you to keep going at those times?
4. Should believers be motivated by the thought of heavenly rewards? How can we keep that motivation pure?

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