

Finishing Well

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[0 : 00] I have a vivid memory as a high school football player of running sprints at the end of every practice. And now when I say a high school football player, let me just be clear. I didn't do a lot of playing. I was on the team.

I didn't play that much, but I was at every practice. And at the end of every practice, after about two hours of full contact drills and running plays, our coach would then make us run sprints, sometimes running sprints up a hill. Full pads, helmets on after we were completely exhausted and tired and sore.

And he would tell us as we were running, you gotta finish well. You gotta finish well. Football is a sport of finishing well. We're going to be a fourth quarter team. We're going to be a team that plays hard up until the clock runs out.

These end of practice sprints were meant to condition our bodies so that if the game was on the line at the end of the fourth quarter, we would still be able to play hard and execute and finish the game well.

This final section here in 2 Timothy chapter 4 is an example of how to finish well in a Christian life. These are the last recorded words that we have from the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 4.

[1 : 25] As we've seen these past few weeks studying this letter, Paul is in a prison cell in Rome. He is awaiting his trial and ultimate execution.

And he's writing this letter to his mentee and protegee, Timothy. And he is passing on the baton, passing on the mantle of leadership. And he's doing all that he can to encourage Timothy, this young pastor, in his ministry and his leadership, but also in his faith.

And here in this final section of the letter in 2 Timothy 4, in verse 6, Paul says, The time for my departure is near. He knows his days are numbered.

And whether it's a few weeks or several months away, we don't know. Maybe he doesn't know. But in this final section, in this final section, we learn a lot about what it means to finish well in the Christian life.

To finish well in the Christian life. So we're going to look at why finishing well matters, what keeps us from finishing well, and how to finish well. Well, what, why finishing well matters, what keeps us from finishing well, and how to finish well.

[2 : 37] So first of all, why finishing well matters. In the beginning of this passage in verses 6 and 7, or as the kids say these days, 6, 7.

If you know, you know. If you don't, ask a teenager. So that's all I got. In verses 6 and 7, Paul says this, I have fought the good fight.

I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. This is an incredible thing to say at the end of one's life.

Paul is not saying this from a place of spiritual pride, but he's saying it with a clear conscience of someone who has been faithful to the gospel and to Jesus, despite great difficulty and suffering. Just like Paul, one day our, the time of our departure is going to come. One day our leg of the race is going to come to an end. And we're going to look back and say one of two things.

[3 : 42] Either I finished well or I wasted it. I look back with regret.

When we're on our deathbeds, when we're in the hospital room, when the hour of our death is impending and coming soon, nobody really wants to look back on their lives and say, I've wasted it all.

I live for myself, for pleasure, for comfort, for success. And it really wasn't satisfying. I have major regrets. And I wish I could go back and change the way I live. No, all of us, whether we're here in this room and we're, we consider ourselves people of faith or not, whether we're Christians or not,

we all want to look back on our life and say, you know, there was hard times. There was discouragement and suffering. There was battle. There were times of complete exhaustion. There were sleepless nights. And I wasn't perfect. I made mistakes, but I've been faithful. I've been faithful to the ministry that God gave me. I've been faithful to the gifts he's given me. I've been faithful to my spouse and to my kids. [4 : 50] I was faithful in serving the church. I did what I could to pass on my faith to others. I was generous with my time and my money. I served my workplace and my neighbors.

I have fought the good fight. I've finished the race. I've kept the faith. Finishing well matters because one day our race is going to come to an end. And we're going to look back either with a clear conscience full of gratitude, or we're going to look back with sadness and regret. The other reason why finishing well matters is what we see next in verse eight. Look with me in your bulletin or in your copy of God's word in verse eight. Paul says this, 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. Scripture is clear here and elsewhere that one day Jesus himself, the good and righteous judge will reward people for their faithful obedience.

And if you're here this morning and you might be thinking, doesn't this kind of make Christianity a selfish faith? The idea of that there's going to be rewards in heaven.

[6 : 04] Aren't people who do things to kind of get rewards in heaven, aren't they kind of selfish? Isn't that kind of a mercenary, a way to approach faith? People, you know, Christians don't really care about helping the poor.

They care about the reward that helping the poor gets them in heaven. Isn't this kind of a selfish motivation? It's a fair question. It's an honest question, but not if you, the answer is no, not if you actually see what Paul is saying here.

Paul is saying, verse eight, that this crown, this reward is for all who love Jesus and who long for his appearing. Those who love Jesus receive the reward of following Jesus.

In his sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis has a great section on this. And Lewis makes this distinction between proper and improper rewards, proper and improper rewards.

In his sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, he says that improper rewards, what you might call a bribe or kind of a mercenary pursuit, have no actual connection with the things that you do to earn them.

[7 : 14] And he gives this example. He says, money is not the proper reward of love, which is why we call a man a mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money.

But a proper reward is a reward that is the fulfillment of the very activity or the action itself. Lewis says, on the flip side, marriage is the proper reward for someone who has fallen in love, and he is not a mercenary for desiring it.

Lewis says that those who've been saved by grace know that their reward from Jesus in heaven is not a bribe, it is the very consummation of their earthly discipleship.

The crown Paul is talking about here, it's not a bribe. He knows he's a sinner, saved and justified by grace, but he is talking about the reward that one day Jesus will give to all people as a reward, as the fulfillment of their faithfulness.

And this promise of a crown, of a heavenly reward, is especially comforting and motivating when following Jesus is costly and difficult.

[8 : 32] Like when following Jesus lands you in a jail cell. And we know that from what's happening in places around the world, in places like China and other places like now, that this isn't just something that Paul experienced, but something that many of our brothers and sisters around the world are experiencing right now.

When following Jesus is costly and difficult, the promise of a heavenly reward is not a bribe. It is a profound comfort.

It is a profound comfort. So finishing well matters. Finishing well matters because one day our race is going to come to an end.

One day the time of our departure is going to come. And it matters because the Lord has promised to reward us for our faithfulness. So that's the first thing that we see, why finishing well matters.

But the second thing that we see is what keeps us then from finishing well. What keeps us from finishing well? Throughout the letter, and especially here at the end in these verses, Paul mentions those who have abandoned him and his ministry.

[9 : 42] And we're not going to look at all of them, but one of those people is a person in verse 10 named Demas. We know from the book of Colossians that Demas was a former colleague of Paul who worked with him in gospel ministry.

At the end of the book of Colossians, Demas is spoken by Paul in positive words. But in verse 10, we learn that Demas had at one point deserted Paul. Paul says, Demas stopped running the race. Demas didn't finish well. You might be here this morning. You might be thinking, you know, life is going pretty well for me. I feel like I'm in a pretty spiritually healthy place.

I've got good Christian friends. I've got, I'm in a great core group. You know, what could possibly keep me from finishing well? What could possibly stop me from running the race?

When I was in seminary, I took a class called the theology of ministry. And it was a great class. There was a lot that I loved about that class. But in that class, we had a difficult and sobering assignment.

[11 : 19] And it was known as the personal sin paper. Not a fun title. But the assignment was to do a hard and sobering task, which was to imagine what are the things in our lives that are most likely to one day in the future disqualify us from ministry?

It was an invitation to do a premortem on what would keep us from finishing well as pastors and leaders. It was a chance to look honestly at our own sins, our own temptations, our own worst tendencies, and to do a lot of self-examination and ask a lot of hard questions.

Questions like, what are the temptations that I need to deal with now so that they don't become a bigger problem in the future? What are the personality tendencies in me that if left unaddressed could maybe one day end up leading me to mistreat or harm others?

What are the parts of my story that need healing and maybe even counseling first before I take a position of leadership? What are the sins in my life that if I do not kill them will end up killing me?

It was a sobering assignment, but it was a good assignment. My professor, Jaron Bars, one of the warmest, sweetest, most godly people that you will ever meet, told us that even though he believed in the importance of the assignment, he thought it was critical for seminary students to reflect on that when it came time to grade them, he would always sit down and read the papers one after the other, and he would weep.

[13 : 01] He would weep because he was reading about the sins and the struggles of the students he loved, and he was reading about the possible impact, the future impact that that could have on the church.

I think that every pastor and every candidate for ordination should have to do this assignment.

Because when it comes to what might keep us from finishing well, there is a lot that we could say.

There's a lot that could keep us from finishing well. At the very least, I think we have to

acknowledge the threefold enemy of every Christian believer. The world, the flesh, and the devil.

The world refers to not God's good material creation, not creation, but the cultures and the patterns that allure us away from God, that allure us towards idolatry, the idols of money and sex and power.

The flesh is our own indwelling sin, our own sin nature, the disordered passions of our own hearts, our own proclivities and temptations to sin. And the devil, we believe, is a real being, Satan, who actively seeks to oppose and disrupt the people of God in spiritual warfare.

[14 : 18] These three enemies pull us and draw us away from running the race, and they tempt us to not finish well. Demas, you know, Demas probably didn't wake up one day and say, you know, someday I'm going to abandon Paul and his ministry, and I'm going to abandon the gospel, and I'm just going to pursue comfort and convenience.

It was probably not a conscious decision that he made. It was probably a long, slow series of small decisions, small moments of compromise, small moments of giving into temptation that gradually led him to a place where he stopped running the race and where he ultimately abandoned Paul in the gospel.

How about you? I know it's a sobering question to ask, but what would be on your pre-mortem paper? What in your life, what in your heart is most likely to keep you from finishing well?

What are the temptations that you need to address so that they don't become a bigger problem in the future? What are the personality tendencies that you have that, if left unaddressed, could one day causing harm to others?

What are the parts of your story that need healing and care first before you move into a greater position of leadership? What are the dispositions or tendencies that you have that may very well

one day become an addiction?

[15 : 55] What are the sins that, if you don't actively kill them now, will end up killing you? These are sobering questions, I realize, but I believe that not only every pastor and candidate for ordination should have to think about these questions, I believe that every follower of Jesus should have to think about these questions.

Because we have a world that allures us away from God, we have a sinful nature that pulls us and tempts us towards sin, and we have an enemy who does not want the gospel to bear fruit in our life or in the world.

We should take an honest look at what it is in our lives that could keep us from finishing well, finishing the race well.

So why finishing well matters, what keeps us from finishing well, and finally, how to finish well. How do we finish the Christian life well? Well, in verses 14 through 16, Paul talks about those who opposed him, those who deserted him, and in verse 16, he refers to his first defense.

The first defense likely refers to something like what we might consider today as a kind of a pre-trial hearing. It was his first court appearance, and anyone who's ever been in a courtroom for a legal proceeding, criminal, or civil knows how meaningful it can be just to have a few family or friends present just for support.

[17 : 22] Paul says, at my first court hearing, nobody came. Nobody came. Imagine what it would be like to be on the trial for your life and to have lots of people who you've loved and invested in and ministered to, and nobody comes.

No doubt this was a painful and lonely place for Paul. So how did he do it? How did he persevere towards the end? How did he finish well? I want to look at a couple things here in chapter four.

The first is this, Paul, he ran with others. He ran with others. Now, despite what we just saw about all these people who have abandoned him and deserted him, we see here in verse 11 that there was one person who stuck by his side.

It makes it clear in verse 11. He says, only Luke is with me. What a beautiful sentence. Luke had been a colleague and tribal companion of Paul's for many years.

Throughout the book of Acts, we see this throughout his letters. And when everyone else had left, when there was nobody left to be beside, be by Paul's side, Luke stuck with Paul to the very end.

[18 : 35] We can only imagine the profound encouragement that Luke was to Paul in his final days, visiting him in his jail cell, praying with him, just being present with him, sitting with him. And friends, I think that Luke's presence in Paul's life is a beautiful example of what the church can be and should be.

All of us need the Luke's in our lives. All of us need the people who will stick by us no matter what, because none of us can run the race alone.

None of us can keep running the race alone. And this is why Paul makes it clear in verse 9 that he wants Timothy and he wants Mark to visit him, because he knows that he needs the presence of others in his life to finish well.

We all need those who will encourage us to keep running the race. We need people. We need people who know what's on our pre-mortem.

We need people who know our temptations, who know our worst tendencies, and who can challenge us and who can keep us accountable. We also need the people, we also need the Luke's in our lives, who can go with us through difficulty and suffering, who can just sit with us in the jail cell, who can visit us in the hospital when we're going through chemo, who can bring us a meal when a loved one is sick.

[20 : 02] If you want to finish well, if you want to finish well like Paul, the good news is that you don't have to run the race alone. There are Luke's in this church, and there are Luke's in our lives that God has given us to run the race with.

And that's why we have the church. So how did Paul finish well? Well, first of all, he ran with others. But secondly, Paul finished the race well by collapsing into grace.

By collapsing into grace. Look at verses 17 and 18. Paul says, But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and all the Gentiles might hear it.

So I was rescued from the lion's mouth, and the Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever.

Amen. As I thought about Paul's words here, closing out his letter in 2 Timothy 4, I couldn't help but think of the story of Derek Redmond in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona.

[21 : 11] If that name doesn't sound familiar, you may have seen the video of Derek Redmond, who was a British sprinter. And he was competing in the semifinal for the men's 400 meters, and he had high hopes of making it to the podium and maybe even winning a gold medal.

But halfway into the race, Redmond had a painful injury. He tore one of his hamstrings, and he knew instantaneously he wasn't going to win.

There's no way that he could win the race. And if you watch the video, you can find it on YouTube. If you watch him, you see him at first. He tries on his own to keep going, and he's hobbling on one leg.

He's hobbling on one leg towards the finish line, and it's clear he's in a lot of pain. And he has a look of anguish on his face, and you're watching the video, and you're thinking, there's no way that he can just hobble by himself.

There's no way he's going to finish the race alone. It's incredibly painful to watch. But then out of the corner of the frame, you see somebody come down out of the stands and onto the track.

[22 : 29] And at first, security people try to stop him, but then the security people realized it's Derek's father. It's Derek's father. And he runs up behind his hobbling son, his son who's in anguish and pain.

He puts his arm around him, and his Derek just collapses. He just collapses and weeps into the arm of his father.

And then they start to walk, and they start to hobble together, and they take a few steps, and they take a few more steps. And after a few moments, they continue to walk.

They continue to hobble together until finally they cross the finish line together. Father and son walking and hobbling towards the finish line.

And as they head towards the finish line, the whole stadium of 65,000 people erupts and gives Derek Redmond and his father a standing ovation. It's an incredible story.

[23 : 32] It's a powerful scene. If you haven't seen this video, go home and find it on YouTube. I don't think that you'll be able to watch it without tearing up.

It's incredibly powerful. And I think this story is incredibly profound for two reasons. It's incredibly moving because one, because this is our story.

This is us. This is the Christian life. No matter how well we start the race, eventually something is going to come along and make us limp. Eventually something is going to come along and make us limp.

Maybe it's a limp of our own making. Maybe it's a limp from our own disordered passions. Maybe it's a limp from a temptation or an addiction. Or maybe it's a limp completely not of our own making. Maybe it's a broken relationship. Maybe it's some kind of suffering or difficulty. It could be any number of things. But we are people who run the Christian life, not as Olympic sprinters, but as those who have a limp.

[24 : 38] And so when I watch the video of Derek Redmond, I look at him and I say, that's me. That's me. This is our story.

This is the Christian life. But secondly, what's so profound about this story is also, this is our God. This is our savior.

This is our Lord. In the moments when we feel like giving up, when it feels like we're all in the race, just all by ourselves, we remember, as Paul says in verse 17, we remember that we have a savior who stands by us and strengthens us.

And this is a savior who doesn't just come down out of the stands and onto the track. It's a savior who has come down out of heaven to earth. Through Jesus, we have a good father who puts his arm around us and who walks alongside us to strengthen us.

And we have a Holy Spirit who empowers us to keep running. Friends, if you're here this morning and you feel like you are just limping along, the good news about running the race and finishing the race is that we don't have to do it alone.

[25 : 51] And we don't have to do it in our own strength. We have a savior who stands beside us to strengthen us as we limp along. All of the places in our lives that we named earlier, that we look at earlier, those places in our pre-mortem, those places that may keep us from finishing well, those temptations, those inclinations to sin, our worst tendencies, the wounds in our life that need healing,

those friends are the very places where we can just collapse into the grace of Jesus.

Knowing that he will be there to catch us and walk alongside us and pour his grace and love into our hearts and to know that he is not ashamed of us and he is not ashamed of our limp.

Just like Derek Redmond's father, Jesus isn't ashamed of our limp. No, he is drawn to it. He runs after it and he pursues us in love.

He strengthens you. He runs alongside you. He heals you and defends you. Moment by moment, day by day, until he safely brings you across the finish line and into his heavenly kingdom forever. And it's in him and it's in his strength that we have any possibility of one day being able to look back on our life and to say with the apostle Paul, you know, there was a lot of difficulty.

[27 : 34] There was a lot of limping along the way. There was some pain. There was some hardship. I made some mistakes. There were a few moments I would like to have back.

But I fought the good fight. I've finished the race. I've kept the faith. And the one who will reward us with the victor's crown is the victor himself who has been running with us the whole time.

As Paul concludes in his letter, to him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. Let's pray together. Our father in heaven, we thank you that you have called us to run the race of the Christian life, but that we don't have to do it alone and we don't have to do it in our own strength.

Lord, would you help us to finish well, to one day be able to look back on our lives with a clear conscience and say, I've fought the good fight.

I've finished the race. I've kept the faith. Lord, would you help us to look honestly at our own hearts and to consider what are the things that might be causing me a limp?

[28 : 56] And Lord, would you bring your healing? Would you bring your grace into those places in our lives through your word, through your spirit, through the companionship of others? Thank you, Jesus, that you run alongside us.

You stand by us. You strengthen us. We thank you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Thank you.