

Temptation: The Final Furlong

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[0 : 0 0] verse 37 there we read that jesus began to be sorrowful and troubled he began to be sorrowful and troubled time rolls by doesn't it it's uh it's hard to believe that this is my last my last engagement with you all as part of my placement here it's a it's an ending of sorts it's the end of my run here and fittingly that's what i want to look at tonight i want to look at coming to the end of the run and the trials the challenges and the temptations that we can find there over the last few weeks i've i've spoken about the times that a runner might feel tempted to give up tempted to turn back and we've used each of these occasions to consider uh events in jesus's life where the devil tried to stop him tried to persuade him to turn away from the path we started by looking at the temptation in the wilderness in matthew chapter 4 where the tempter tried to stop him before he even started we thought about the obstacles that can hit us midway through a run and we looked at the devil striking through peter jesus's friend in matthew 16 i'll tell you the third time that i'm most tempted to quit when i'm running is as i approach the final section of a run the end is in sight and i've already put in the work for most of the run i'm so close to being there sometimes that last few minutes that final 500 meters sometimes that is the hardest part of the whole run you feel like you have got nothing left in the tank your legs are gone you have nothing to give you feel like it has taken all your strength and all your energy just to get you this far and the thought that there is more to go is just crushing that line seems so close and yet so so far away you can see the end you're just not sure if you can make it in the section that we read tonight it takes place on the night of jesus's arrest he was near the end of his earthly run the end was in sight but he knew what was in store for him before he reached it he knew what he still had to pass through to get there and this time there's no specific mention of satan the adversary the enemy but jesus's resolve is tested again one final time the devil tries to derail god's plan to rescue his people tonight i want to consider this account i want to consider what it tells us about how jesus dealt with this temptation this obstacle so near the end of his run i want to look at how we can apply some of those lessons to our own lives our own run of faith particularly if we are coming up towards the end or an end either the end of our lives or perhaps just the end of our current run as god prepares us for something new and we get ready for what he has planned for us next but first we need to finish the section we're on

and tonight i want to look at it under four headings i want to think about finding strength i want to consider willpower i want to think about an encouraging voice and finally i want to say eyes on the prize so finding strength willpower an encouraging voice and eyes on the prize back at home my house sits up on a bit of a hill it means i can see over the tops of some of the other houses get a bit of a view there it's not the steepest hill on my run but it is the last challenge i face before i get home and you know there are higher hills and steeper hills on the run but in many ways this one is the hardest that last slope over that last half kilometre or so you know so close sometimes i think it's going to finish me off i really do but the thing is if i want to finish the run i have to climb it i could stop where i am and say no no i've done enough i've had enough that's sufficient exercise for me today but if i do that i'm never going to get home am i well the last part of the run is often the toughest where we can face the biggest temptation to pack it in to quit if we want to finish we need to do it we need to keep on we need to find the strength throughout the bible particularly in the in the letters to the new testament churches we find the image of the race used over and over again for the christian life as it encourages us to to press on to persevere to complete the race hebrews 12 verse 1 is just one example of this if we are going to run we need to complete the course no matter how tough that last leg is now for a runner who finds this section of the run tough the advice is generally dig deep find the strength inside yourself now how does that work for the christian race i've often heard people say that god will never send us circumstances that we can't handle but that's not strictly true is it there isn't really a biblical warrant for that statement in some ways because god will frequently send us things which we if we relied on our own strength they would crush us utterly what he won't do ever is send us circumstances that he can't handle we sang psalm 18 psalm 18 doesn't just say that i can write an army or i can leap a high wall it says by you i can run against a troop and by my god i can over leap a wall to finish this run the strength we need comes from god not from ourselves so we need to go to him and that is exactly what we see jesus doing in this passage he goes to the father in earnest prayer he pours out his heart to him he is up front and completely honest verse 39

if there is any other way verse 42 if this is the only way that's what we need to do with our concerns with our struggles with our trials with our pain when we are at the end of ourselves and we feel like we can't go on we need to take it to god and cry out to him in fact you know what don't wait for that don't wait until you're done go to god he knows what we need and he will never withhold it from us and that is not to say he will always make our path easy he will always make our route smooth because where the path is hard it's hard but he will give us the strength to get through if we are relying on him and runners are often told that we need willpower it's our second heading we need to have the determination and the grit and the drive to get us to the end we need to focus our will on the objective and willpower of a sort it is important to christians running god's race but it's different just as finding strength isn't about our own strength so the will which powers us can't be our own look what jesus says in verse 39 not as i will but as you and then again we have it in verse 42 your will be done every sunday we've been praying the lord's prayer and we say that there don't we thy will be done but do we really mean it are we prepared for what that entails now i i know some people who make really uncomfortable passengers because they just don't like being in a car that they are not in control of well to mix my metaphors just a little bit that is the way it is in the christian life it's the way it has to be we're not the driver and we're not the navigator god decides where we run and what the conditions are going to be you can't win a race if you decide to follow your own route instead of the one the organizers have laid out we come to god in prayer to seek his will not our own if we spend our time trying to bend god around our will our desires our hopes then not only are we going to be disappointed but we are going to waste an incredible amount of energy on that instead we need to be asking god to reshape our will around his we need to give ourselves over to his will to recognize that he is in control and to trust him utterly not my will lord but yours and there's something else which can which can help on a run when your strength

is flagging when your resolve is running low when your tank is empty and that's an encouraging voice our third point now for some people that might be a running companion who runs with them or it might be a trainer who comes alongside them so that when you hit the hard spots they can give you that little bit extra incentive they can tell you you've got this you can do it you're doing really well perhaps it's a bit of tough come on get moving shift yourself encouraging you to give it all you've got and keep on going till the end now I run on my own because I'm worried that everyone else might be faster than me I run on my own but I run with an app so I have a voice in my head it's not as bad as it sounds it is just in my headphones in my case it's the radio presenter Joe Wiley other voices are available and this voice gives me a heads up at key timing points it tells me that's you done five minutes you're making a good start that's you halfway gives me an incentive it encourages me it tells me you're doing great and towards the end of the time run it kicks in and says only five minutes left you're so close to the end just keep going and then with 60 seconds to go you get that just one more minute come on see what you've got left in the tank see what you can do now that can make a huge difference when you are flagging but you realise that this is all you've got still to go you've done it this far you can do this keep going that encouragement now in Luke's account of Jesus' visit to Gethsemane he includes a little bit of information that Matthew didn't because in verse 43 of that account we're told that when he prayed

God sent an angel from heaven to comfort and to support him now in John chapter 14 Jesus speaks to his disciples about what will happen after he's gone and in verses 15 and 26 he talks about a helper who he will send from heaven to those who follow him a comforter and sometimes the word is translated as comforter or advocate in the Greek it's parakleton which really literally means one who is called to be alongside us unlike the voice in my head this is not a recording unlike that voice it's not just mouthing helpful phrases because Jesus specifies that this comforter that he will send to come alongside us is none other than the Holy Spirit the third person of the Godhead and just like the angel in Luke's account the Holy Spirit is sent from heaven to be our comforter to be our strength to sustain us to encourage us as we run the race as we come to the end of our strength for the believer he is a constant companion and he will never let us down he will never give us bad advice he will never give up on us no matter how slowly we are stumbling along the path that's been set out for us people will spend a fortune on a good personal trainer to encourage them in their exercise efforts but the Holy Spirit is beyond price and he knows us better than we know ourselves is that not the ultimate tailored package when we are flagging we need to ask

[15 : 56] God to help us to be aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit called alongside us and we need to be attentive to his encouragement which keeps us going until the end and my final advice for runners finding it hard to get to the finish line is keep your eyes on the prize athletes will often talk about visualising their success thinking of and focusing on what victory will look like that personal best that medal that podium whatever it is visualise it focus on it think about what you are doing this for and when I am approaching the end of a run and I need that boost I need that little bit more energy I visualise that I visualise the end and I focus on that trying to exclude distractions now in my case the reward isn't a medal or a podium it's getting to stop running and frankly that is enough most days still something to focus on and as he prayed in that garden

Jesus was contemplating the point of his race the culmination of his work on earth he was focused on whatever it took to get the job done to complete the plan that he and the father had had since the beginning of time itself before creation began he knew what the end of this race was and he knew what the result would be and even as he contemplated the horror of what he was about to go through he was focusing on what was necessary and what he would achieve victory over death and sin and the salvation of his people and as we undertake our Christian life particularly if we come to the end of a section or even the end of our run altogether we need to focus on what it is all about we need to keep our eyes on the prize to be and

Hebrews 12 already after encouraging us to throw off any encumbrances so that we can run with endurance in verse 2 it reminds us that we need to be 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 philippians chapter 3 verses 13 and 14 but one thing i do forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead i press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of god in christ jesus we need to keep our eyes on jesus jesus who is both the prize and the one who has gone before us to show us the path and guide us home he is what we're running towards and we need to keep our eyes and our focus completely on him with all our hearts with all our minds with all our body with all our soul we have to be focused on him because that is the only way we are ever going to finish this race are your eyes set on jesus or are you looking back are you considering all the things you might be asked to leave behind because if you are forget about it what lies ahead is much much more precious infinitely more valuable keep your eyes on the prize and focus on jesus as you press on to the end now i don't know where each of you are in your race i don't know if you're just starting off or if you're drawing towards the end i don't know if that end you might be facing just now is the end of one section as god prepares you for something else for the next route or if it really is or if it really is the end of your running as jesus stands ready to welcome you home but this advice stands wherever in your race you are now sometimes sometimes even when we think we can't go on he will give us a sort of second wind and it will be enough to cross that finish line with a final glorious sprint other times it's enough that he gets us across the line and he will now i hope that in the time we've spent looking at these passages together considering what god has to say to us from them that you've found something which will help you as you run with him and run to him as i reach the end of of this section of my run of my time here i'd like to just briefly summarize some of what i've said some of what we've seen looking at these events in matthew's gospel about dealing with trials

and temptations whether at the start of the run at the end or the obstacles we met on the way trust in the word of god you need to know it and you need to be ready to rely on it both as it is written and in the form of jesus christ the word made flesh put obstacles behind you so that you can run on even those things you value if they become obstacles if they become stumbling blocks get them behind you and run on and then tonight press on to the end seeking strength and prayer to god the father taking encouragement from the presence of god the holy spirit and keeping your eyes firmly fixed on jesus christ god the son in this way run your race that god has set out for you that you finally one day can lay claim to the prize of eternal life in jesus christ now and forever amen let's briefly bow our heads lord god we give you thanks for this word and we pray that you would help us to take it to heart we pray that you would help us to seek your strength and your will to draw encouragement from the holy spirit to follow keeping our eyes on jesus wherever the route takes us wherever your run takes us whatever stage we're at and we pray lord for those who might be listening to this who aren't on that path yet who haven't taken that first day yet lord may they hear tonight your word and may it challenge them and may they get no peace until they find the peace that comes from you may they join us on that run and may we rejoice at having them with us as heaven rejoices whenever another is saved oh lord god just hear us tonight we pray hear our prayers fill us with an awareness of your greatness and your glory we ask this in jesus name amen i'd like i'd like i'd like i'd like i'd like i'd like