

Text: II Timothy 4:6-8
Title: “Finishing Well”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION – A few months ago I learned that my dear friend Ellery Lawrence was dying of cancer. Ellery was the deacon chairman in the first church I pastored. He was such a godly man and a real encouragement to me as a young pastor. He and his wife Bettye taught us so much about Christian grace. He was always hopeful and faithful. In 1979 when a tornado ripped through Wichita Falls his home was destroyed along with many of the rest of the members of the church. But Ellery didn't think about his own needs. You would find him most Saturdays working at someone else's house helping them to recover. He loved non-believers and would often take me to see friends and loved ones who needed to know Christ. On a recent trip to Wichita Falls Nan and I stopped by to see Ellery at the hospice facility where he was receiving care. We hadn't seen him in several years and we weren't sure if he would recognize us. When we walked into his room, he was lying in the bed, his body emaciated by cancer, but his face lit up with his typical joyous smile. And we spent a half-hour just rehashing good memories. At one point in the conversation Ellery talked about how God had been so faithful to him throughout his battle with cancer. He was concerned for his wife and family, but his faith was still strong. With tears welling up in his eyes Ellery said, “Mike, I know where I am going and I am excited!” Just a couple of weeks after we visited Ellery he went to be with Jesus. He finished well. I want to challenge us today about finishing well.

Open your Bibles to II Timothy 4:6-8. What we have before us this morning here in II Timothy are probably the last words of Scripture from the Apostle Paul. He was incarcerated in a Roman prison in terrible conditions. The time of execution was near. He somehow managed to dictate a letter to his friend and son in the faith Timothy, who was the pastor of the church in Ephesus. Paul writes to exhort Timothy to stay strong in his walk with the Lord and in fulfilling the assignment God had given to him to preach the Gospel. He challenged the church to do the same. And Paul uses his own life and ministry as an example to Timothy and to each of us about finishing well. Read II Timothy 4:6-8.

It occurs to me that we should finish a year with the same determination that Paul finished his life. We might well use this as a way to evaluate our lives as we come to the end of 2012. Have I fought the good fight this year, have I finished the race this year ... have I kept the faith this year. In fact we can use this at the end of a life, at the end of a year, or at the end of a week, or at the end of a day. As we near the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, let's be challenged from Scripture about finishing well.

1. ONE SOBERING REALITY (v.6)

2 Timothy 4:6 - For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.

It is as if Paul is saying, “Timothy, be faithful, because I won't be in this world much longer, my life is at its end, but you must carry on God's work.”

As Paul looks soberly at what he knows is ahead for himself he uses two powerful images.

First, he said “I am being poured out like a drink offering.”

The picture he paints with these words is the picture of the drink offering that was poured out as a sacrifice. Wine was placed in a cup and poured out before the Lord. Paul may have also had in mind the kind of death he would face. He would not be crucified because he was a Roman citizen. More than likely Paul expected he would be beheaded as his execution. His blood would be poured out.

And that's the way Paul saw his life going ... being poured out, emptied like a cup before the Lord. What a way to look at our lives. Not lived to store up stuff for ourselves, but to be poured out like a drink offering before the Lord.

Second, he said “the time for my departure has come.”

When Paul speaks of his “departure,” he’s also painting a powerful picture. That word was used in different ways in the language of Paul’s culture. It was used of a ship pulling up anchor and setting out to sea. And Paul was about pull up his anchor in this world set out on the final voyage to his heavenly home. The word was also used in military circles to describe an army taking down its tents and breaking camp. The word was also used of the release of a prisoner, and the unyoking of an ox.

All these images show us that for the child of God death is not something to be feared. It sets us free from the burdens of this world to live eternally in the presence of our Savior Jesus.

But right up to our last minutes, our lives are to be lived as those who are being poured out like a drink offering, and are ready to pull up our anchor in this life and sail to heaven’s shore.

ILLUSTRATION – At our Christmas Eve service I did a dramatic dialogue with Lottie Moon with the help of Dr. Rebekah Naylor. Lottie Moon told others that she believed that so long as God had work for her to do in this world she was immortal. She believed that no matter what dangers she faced, nothing could take her life until God was finished with her in this world. So why worry about saving herself? She could, like Paul, be poured out before the Lord like an offering.

So from the perspective of his present situation Paul looks back on his life of walking with and serving the Lord from the day he was saved. Now look at ...

2 Timothy 4:7 - I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

As Paul scans his life, he sums it up in three vivid phrases. And he uses images that would have been familiar to others who lived in his day ... the image of a Greek wrestler, a Greek runner and a Roman soldier.

“I HAVE FOUGHT THE GOOD FIGHT.” The word for fight is the word from which we get our word “agony,” and it pictures the struggle of one engaged in the athletic games, like a wrestler. When it is called the “good fight” it describes the worthiness and beauty of the struggle in which he is engaged. He can walk out of the arena knowing that he has left everything there. He held nothing back in the struggle.

Note: Each of these phrases translate perfect tense verbs, which means completed action with ongoing results. Paul fought and finished the fight, and he’s now resting in the victory of the beautiful fight.

“I HAVE FINISHED THE RACE.” Here’s another picture from the world of ancient athletics. It’s the picture of the track on which the runner runs the race. I’ve been able to visit a few of these in parts of Greece and Rome, and they’re very similar to the track that is found around most football fields. And Paul says, “Like a Greek runner, I have run the race properly, crossed the finish line and now I rest in that victory.” The life of a Christ-follower is a race to be run with perseverance to the very end. It’s not a sprint; it’s a marathon.

“I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH.” The faith was like a treasure that had been entrusted to Paul. And like a faithful soldier he understood the value of it and he guarded it (that’s way “kept” means) with his very life.

Kenneth Wuest summarizes it this way: “The desperate, straining, agonizing contest marked by its beauty of technique, I, like a wrestler, have fought to a finish, and at present am resting in its victory; my race, I like a runner have finished, and at present am resting at the goal; the Faith committed to my care, I, like a soldier, have kept safely through everlasting vigilance.”

So Paul looks back on all that he has completed in his life and it is intended to provoke Timothy, and us, to the same faithfulness. So we might ask ourselves three questions:

2. **THREE CHALLENGING QUESTIONS (v.7)**

2 Timothy 4:7 - I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

AM I ENGAGED IN A WORTHY STRUGGLE?

Am I fighting the “good fight”? And so here we have the picture of the struggle all believers face in our battle against sin and the flesh and the devil. Many believers are ignorant of this fact, and that get discouraged because they feel the force of sin, and the flesh and the devil, and they think there’s something wrong with them. No, friend, the Christian life is a struggle. Never forget that. God never intended it to be easy for us.

ILLUSTRATION – One of my favorite quotes from Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States, comes from a speech he made in Paris in 1910. Roosevelt firmly believed that it’s to better to stumble than to do nothing or to sit by and criticize those that are “in the arena”:

“It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.” "Citizenship in a Republic," Speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910

So am I engaged in a worthy struggle?

AM I STAYING ON COURSE?

It’s easy for us to forget that God has a race for us to run and course for us to follow in life. I’m amazed at so many believers who never consider that God has a will for their lives that He expects them to pursue. And your course will be different from my course. We all must run the race that has been marked out for us. That’s what the writer of Hebrews had in mind when he wrote:

Hebrews 12:1 - Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

“everything that hinders” = things that slow us down

ILLUSTRATION – It’s like running a race carrying a back pack filled with books. It’s fine to carry a back pack if you’re on a hike. But if you’re running a race you don’t need the excess weight. What are you carrying around in life that is slowing you down in the race that God has marked out for you? Throw it off.

“sin that so easily entangles” = things that trip us up

ILLUSTRATION – It’s like running a race in rain boots. Now if you’re shoveling snow, rain boots are fine. But if you’re running a race in rain boots you’ll fall flat on your face eventually. What sins continually trip you up? Throw it off.

Hebrews 12:2 - Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Now there’s another question we need to ask ourselves in light of these verses.

AM I TREASURING THE FAITH?

The life that we have in Christ is like a treasure that is to be guarded because it is precious to us. Our trust relationship with Christ is the most valuable thing in life to us, and we must guard it. Is that what is most precious to you ... your walk with Christ, the promises of His Word, the mission He has for you to accomplish?

Now all of this is worth it all to Paul because of ...

3. ONE CONFIDENT ASSURANCE (v.8)

2 Timothy 4:8 - Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.

Paul has looked at his present situation, his past accomplishments and now a future assurance.

Now Paul's use of pictures from Greek athletics is not finished. He likens himself to the Greek athlete, who, having won his race, is looking up at the judge's stand, and awaiting his laurel wreath of victory that will be placed on his head. That's what the crown is. It's not the crown of *royalty*, but the crown of *victory*.

It is a "crown of righteousness." It is the final installment of the complete righteousness we have by grace through faith in Christ alone.

It is awarded to us by "the righteous Judge." Now this is interesting. God is truly a righteous Judge in the judicial sense. We give an account to Him. But the word is also used that is used to describe a competition judge ... like an umpire or referee in an athletic event. He's the one who signals the touchdown, or who calls the runner safe at home, or who holds up his arms signaling a three-pointer. And he's the one who recognizes the winner. There is no need of review in the booth, as they have today in football. No challenges are necessary. He is the righteous Judge.

And all this happens "on that day." That is, on the day when Christ comes again to establish His millennial reign upon the earth. Notice that rewards don't come when you die. Why? It is because the impact and influence of your life lives on past your life. So everything is taken into account.

And it belongs to all who "long for his appearing." It is something more precious to us than anything in this life. Do you long for his appearing? Is that in your mind every day you live? "Lord, is today the day? If so, let me be found finishing well."

CONCLUSION

ILLUSTRATION – The day after tomorrow on New Year's Day I plan to run a marathon down in Houston. And these words have been really vivid to me as I was preparing to preach. In my training I often think of how the marathon race began. In 490BC the Athenians won an important battle over the Persians near a small coastal village called Marathon. It was important that the news of the victory quickly reach the Greek magistrates who were meeting in Athens. Tradition has it that a soldier named Pheidippides took off running to Athens with the victorious news. The distance from Marathon to Athens was a little more than 26 miles, which is the distance of the modern day marathon race. Pheidippides ran with such abandon that after he delivered the news to the magistrates in Athens he collapsed and died. He had completed his mission; he had finished well.