

Finishing Well

PRAY.

Paul said *I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.* (Acts 20:24).

I’ve never enjoyed running but I have a race for those of you who do. Later this month the 100 mile **Western States Endurance Run** will take place in California’s Sierra Nevadas. In the first 4 ½ miles out of Squaw Valley competitors will face a vertical climb of over 2500 feet. Following old miners’ trails accessible only to hikers, horses and helicopters, they will climb another 15,000 feet before descending nearly 23,000. Before they arrive at the finish line in Auburn 2 days later, they must wade through snow fields and creeks full of spring runoff.

Despite the brutal terrain, so many people apply that competitors are chosen by lottery. Americans, are joined by runners from Nepal, Italy, France, S. Africa, Iceland, UK, and Norway. Even a few 50 year-olds join the 30 and 40-something crowd. Finishing well has more to do with conditioning than age. The DNF’s fall to exhaustion, hypothermia (temperature can drop to 0 at the highest altitudes), lost body fluids, sprains or broken bones, shredded quads from the steep descent, or feet so blistered their shoes are blood-soaked. Finishers join an elite class.

Find Acts 28:17-31. Acts’ last verses. We’ve watched the apostle Paul run a race since chapter 13 that many would have dropped out of: whippings, stonings, shipwrecks, hunger, thirst, hard hours without sleep would have sent most home. But Paul kept running and ran well. When the finish line came, unfortunately it wasn’t recorded in Acts or anywhere in the Bible. But we’re going to stitch some things together from Scripture and history to commemorate his faithful finish. READ.

1. Paul’s race

In custody in Rome, Paul, assuming local Jews had been warned about him, invited them to a meeting. “No, we haven’t heard bad reports about *you*, but we *have* heard some troubling things about Christianity.” As always, Paul used the meeting to speak about Jesus. And—as always—the reaction was mixed: some for him, some against him; some receptive, some dismissive. To those who turned away, Paul said what he had often said to his own people...

“Fine, you’re like Isaiah said: calloused hearts, unhearing ears, closed eyes. So, God has given His good news not just to you, but Gentiles too.” For the next 2 years, Paul preached about Jesus *boldly and without hindrance...* (31). Unfortunately, we don’t know for sure what happened then. Best evidence from 1, 2 Tim. & Titus, suggests he was probably released. And then some years later, re-arrested. During this new custody in AD 64, a disaster in Rome probably hastened Paul’s death.

In mid-July a fire began in the shops around Rome’s massive stadium, the Circus Maximus. Winds quickly fanned the flames out of control. After raging nine days, 10 of Rome’s 14 districts were either ash heaps or badly damaged. Since Nero was mad at the Senate for denying his request to remodel Rome to his own liking, suspicion quickly fell on the emperor even though he was out of town when it began.

Guilty or not, Nero needed a scapegoat. Roman historian Tacitus claims Nero blamed the Christians since nobody liked them anyway. The bloodthirsty holocaust which followed killed many Christians—including, tradition tells us, Paul and Peter. Because Peter was not a Roman citizen he was crucified. Because Paul was, he was probably taken outside the city and beheaded.

I wonder what this broken, elderly man thought as he looked out through the bars in his final weeks of his life. Did he have regrets?

- “I wish I could have been married; if only I could have had someone by my side through all this it would have been more bearable.” READ 1 Cor.7:26, 32b-34.
- Or, “I wish I could have had children, someone to carry on my name.” READ Gal.4:19.
- Or maybe Paul said on the final days, “I wish I could have spent my time doing something beside preaching.” READ 1 Cor.9:16-18.
- Or, I wish I could have avoided the suffering. READ Rom.5:3; Phil.3:10.

No, approaching the finish line Paul had no regrets. Instead of *wishing* he’d run the race for God, he *had* run it; he was finishing well. READ 2 Tim.4:6-8:

⁶For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Now 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.

2. Your race

How will you finish your race? Maybe we should talk about this as the “Great Race, the Christian life. And the Christian life maybe should be called the “Great Life.” Because it lives out the Greats:

- Great commandment: love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves...
- Great commission: spread the good news that Jesus Christ died and rose again to save sinners. Like our mission statement says: we aim to know God and make Him known.

Great Commandment, Great commission. Are you running well; and will you finish well?” There are so many distractions aren’t there? Some are bad but most are good things: job, school, family, hobbies, pastimes, projects, leisure, friends, politics. Paying attention to them is not wrong, but do the “Greats” dominate even those things, or vice versa? At salvation we entered the race, but are our eyes still on the finish line?

I confess to a bad habit: when I drive, my eyes wander. I look at houses, I look at beautiful fields, I look for deer, I watch the tourists, I look at cars, at motorcycles, I spot the beautiful sunset. If we’re on unfamiliar roads, I’m like a little kid who doesn’t get out much; I look at *everything*; it’s all so new. Betty claims I look everywhere but the road but that’s not true. Sometimes I *do* look at the road!

Are we fixing our eyes on the finish line, determined to finish well by the grace of God, or has the scenery, the traffic and the people, so distracted our attention that we’ve forgotten there *is* a finish line? If I knew that I had a month to live, would I change anything? If the finish line was within sight, would I want to change much, or be satisfied with how I was running?

READ 1 Cor.9:24-25. *²⁴Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.*

Running the race and finishing well is not about satisfying some legalistic requirements like how many times do I have to share the gospel, or, how many worship services must I attend, or how much money must I give, or how many people can I dislike and still be running? It is rooted in what rules what in my life: God and his pleasure rules me, or me and my pleasure rules me? Are you running the race well? Will you finish well?

Concl:

My father-in-law was a working man who never went beyond 9th grade. His dad died when he was 14. He farmed until he lost 4 fingers in a cornpicker, then did painting and papering for a number of years. Then for 30 some years he drove fuel oil truck. 10 years ago he finished his race and I know of no man who has ever finished better. He was no preacher, no church planter or missionary in the conventional sense. But through what he said, what he did, how he served, what he gave, no one could miss that this man loved God with all his being, and loved others like himself. And as God gave him opportunity, he spoke about his Lord.

In your final days as you sit on a faded chair in your nursing home room and look out through the bars of your life, what will you think about your race? Will you wish you had time to do it over, or say, "I have no regrets; I've finished well?"