



Summary

What does it mean to truly finish well? In Acts 21, we find ourselves walking alongside one of the most compelling figures in all of Scripture as he presses forward into danger, hardship, and ultimately imprisonment -- not reluctantly, but with a sense of divine purpose that refused to be extinguished. The central tension of this passage is striking: the very people who loved Paul most, filled with genuine concern and even prophetic warning, pleaded with him to turn back. And yet Paul's response cuts right to the heart of what it means to live fully surrendered to God's calling. He was not reckless or indifferent to the cost -- he simply counted that cost and found it worth paying. The spiritual lesson here is one that challenges us deeply. How often do we allow the loving but flesh-filtered counsel of those around us to drown out what the Holy Spirit has already confirmed in our own hearts? Paul's example invites us to examine the difference between redirection and discouragement, and to ask honestly whether we are truly listening for God's voice or simply seeking permission to stay comfortable. His zeal, expressed so powerfully in Romans 9, where he declares he could wish himself accursed for the sake of his unbelieving countrymen, reminds us that authentic faith produces a kind of love for others that goes far beyond what feels reasonable or safe.





Points

Title: Finishing the Race: The Unretiring Faith of the Apostle Paul

Sermon Summary: Drawing from Acts 21, this sermon examines the final leg of Paul's missionary journey to Jerusalem and the remarkable determination he demonstrated in the face of repeated warnings, personal danger, and the pleading of those who loved him. The pastor uses Paul's example to challenge believers to resist the temptation of spiritual retirement, arguing that the Christian life is a race meant to be run through the tape until the very end. Paul's boundless zeal for his Jewish countrymen, his willingness to suffer chains and death for the gospel, and his continued fruitfulness even from prison serve as a call to the congregation to step off the sidelines and back into active ministry. The sermon emphasizes that God's individual plan for each believer does not include permanent withdrawal from kingdom work, and that the harvest remains plentiful while laborers remain few.

Key Points:

- Paul was warned repeatedly by the Holy Spirit, through believers at Tyre and through the prophet Agabus, that chains and suffering awaited him in Jerusalem, yet he remained undeterred because he was led by the same Spirit to go
- The loving concern of fellow believers can sometimes filter spiritual direction through fleshly desire to spare others from difficulty, and while such counsel should be heard, the believer who has heard clearly from God must ultimately follow that leading
- Paul's willingness to undergo the Nazarite purification rite at the Jerusalem elders' suggestion demonstrated that his Judaism had not been eradicated but completed in Christ, and that he was willing to become all things to all people in order to win some
- False impressions about a minister's teaching can spread rapidly and create serious conflict, as demonstrated by the Jewish crowd's mistaken belief that Paul had brought a Gentile into the temple
- Even Paul's arrest and imprisonment became an opportunity for gospel witness, as members of the Roman palace guard heard the message of Christ while chained to the apostle



- Paul never contemplated retirement from ministry, and even from prison wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, letters that remain foundational to Christian doctrine
- The congregation is called to recognize unmet ministry needs, including home fellowship hosts and facilitators, youth ministry leaders, children's Bible teachers, and prison and senior home ministers, as present opportunities rather than someone else's responsibility
- Salvation is the necessary first step before any ministry engagement, and it rests entirely on faith in Christ's finished work on the cross, never on human effort or merit

Scripture Reference:

- Acts 21:1-40 (primary passage, covering Paul's journey to Jerusalem, the warnings he received, his arrival, his encounter with James and the elders, and the riot in the temple)
- Acts 9:15-16, where Jesus tells Ananias that Paul is a chosen vessel who will suffer for the name of Christ
- Acts 19:21 and Acts 20:16, establishing Paul's determined purpose to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost
- Acts 20:22-24, Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders declaring his readiness to face chains and death
- 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul's athletic metaphor of running to win an imperishable crown and disciplining the body
- 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul's declaration that he became all things to all people in order to win some
- 2 Timothy 4:6-8, Paul's final written words declaring he has fought the good fight and finished the race
- 2 Corinthians 5:17, the new creation passage illustrated by Philip welcoming his former persecutor Paul into his home
- Romans 9:1-5, Paul's extraordinary statement that he could wish himself accursed from Christ if it meant the salvation of his Jewish countrymen
- Matthew 9:35-38, Jesus moved with compassion over scattered sheep, instructing his disciples to pray for laborers in the plentiful harvest



- Acts 11:27-30, the earlier prophecy of Agabus predicting a famine, establishing the credibility of his prophetic gift

Stories:

- The account of Philip the Evangelist welcoming Paul into his home in Caesarea is highlighted as a powerful illustration of 2 Corinthians 5:17, since Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus, had likely witnessed the stoning of Philip's friend Stephen and had driven Philip out of Jerusalem through persecution, making their warm reunion a testimony to the transforming power of Christ

- The prophet Agabus dramatically using Paul's belt as a physical prop to bind his own hands and feet and declare what would happen to Paul in Jerusalem is presented as consistent with the prophetic tradition of Ezekiel and Jeremiah using objects to communicate divine messages

- The gathering of men, women, and children at the shore in Tyre to kneel and pray with Paul before his departure is offered as a moving picture of the community that ministry produces, compared by the pastor to the congregation's own beach baptism services

- Paul's imprisonment in Rome is described as an unintended evangelistic opportunity, with Roman guards chained to him throughout the day becoming a captive audience for the gospel, resulting in conversions throughout the palace guard

- The pastor shares the example of his own pastor, Chuck Smith, who preached on a Sunday with advanced lung cancer and oxygen tanks at his side and died the following Tuesday, holding him up alongside Paul as a modern example of running through the tape to the very end



Scripture

Here is a list of all scripture references mentioned or alluded to in the sermon:

Scripture References from the Sermon

- 2 Corinthians 5:17

Referenced by Allusion or Background Context

Directly Cited References

2 Timothy

- 2 Timothy 4:6-8

- Numbers 6 (the Nazarite
vow)

Acts

Romans

- Leviticus 23 (the seven
feasts)

- Acts 9:15-16

- Romans 9:1-5

- Isaiah 53 (the Ethiopian
eunuch's reading)

- Acts 11:27-30

Philippians

- Ezekiel (use of prophetic
props)

- Acts 18:18

- Philippians 1:12-13

- Jeremiah (use of
prophetic props)

- Acts 19:21

- Acts 20:4

Matthew

- Galatians (Paul's
opposition to Judaizers)

- Acts 20:16

- Matthew 9:35-38

- Acts 6 (appointment of
the seven deacons)

- Acts 20:22-24

- Acts 21:1-40

- Acts 7 (stoning of
Stephen)

1 Corinthians

- Acts 8 (Philip in Samaria;
the Ethiopian eunuch)

- 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

- Acts 15 (the Jerusalem
Council)

2 Corinthians



Quotes

- I am ready not only to be bound but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.
- I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, for my countrymen, according to my flesh.
- but none of these things move me, nor do I count my life dear to myself so that I may finish my race with joy and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.
- We pray all the time, Lord, change this world, and we're the answer to that prayer.
- His arrest was the end of Paul's life in ministry, or so it seemed. At an age, remember, he didn't have to go into this, at an age when Paul could have retired to a life of well-earned rest. After all, how much more could he do?
- Retirement was never on his mind. A life of ease was never on his mind.
- I thank you for the example of my pastor, Pastor Chuck Smith, who preached on Sunday and died on Tuesday. He preached on Sunday with advanced lung cancer with oxygen tanks at his side, preaching right down to the very last moment of his life.
- You see that? And look. When I say as the Spirit may lead, I say as the Spirit may lead.
- Paul ran through the tape. He didn't let up. He never let up. He never withdrew from his race to become an observer, as so many people do.
- the harvest truly is plentiful, but what's the issue? The laborers are few.



Discussion Questions

- Paul was warned repeatedly by the Holy Spirit and by fellow believers about the suffering that awaited him in Jerusalem, yet he pressed on anyway -- how do you discern the difference between godly caution from others and a calling you must follow regardless of the cost?
- Philip the Evangelist welcomed into his home the very man who had persecuted him and murdered his friend Stephen -- what does this radical act of forgiveness reveal about the transforming power of the gospel, and where in your own life might you be withholding that same grace?
- Paul wrote in Romans 9 that he could wish himself accursed from Christ if it meant the salvation of his Jewish countrymen -- what does this level of sacrificial love for the lost challenge you to consider about the depth of your own concern for those around you who do not yet know Christ?
- The sermon draws a distinction between the Holy Spirit's warning to others about Paul's danger and the Holy Spirit's call on Paul's own life to go to Jerusalem -- how do you navigate the tension between wise counsel from community and the personal conviction of your individual calling?
- Paul never contemplated retirement from ministry, even when imprisoned, and continued to write letters that became foundational Scripture -- how does this challenge the modern tendency to see retirement as a time to step back from active service to God rather than a season to redirect that service?
- The sermon notes that Paul's Judaism was not eradicated but completed through his faith in Christ -- how does understanding the continuity between the Old and New Testaments deepen your appreciation for the full counsel of God's Word?
- Agabus prophesied what would happen to Paul but did not tell him not to go, while others around Paul used that same prophecy as a reason to beg him to stay -- what does this tell us about the difference between receiving a word from God and interpreting what God requires us to do with it?
- Paul told the Ephesian elders that he did not count his life dear to himself so that he might finish his race with joy -- in what areas of your own life are you holding too tightly to comfort, security, or reputation in ways that might be keeping you from fully running your race?
- The sermon emphasizes that the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few, and that believers are the answer to their own prayers for God to change the world -- what specific gift, life experience, or season of life do you have right now that could be offered back to God as a laborer in that harvest?
- Paul became all things to all people in order to win some, as seen in his willingness to participate in Jewish purification rites without compromising the gospel of grace -- where in your life might flexibility in method and firmness in message open doors for you to reach people who would otherwise remain closed to the gospel?



Small Group Guide:

Small Group Guide

"Finishing Well: Running Through the Tape"

Based on Acts 21

Overview

This session explores the Apostle Paul's unwavering commitment to finish his God-given mission, even in the face of danger, opposition, and the loving pleas of those closest to him. As Paul pressed toward Jerusalem knowing what awaited him, he models for us what it means to run through the tape rather than withdraw from the race.

Key Takeaways

- Paul was warned repeatedly by those who loved him not to go to Jerusalem, yet he remained obedient to what the Holy Spirit had already made clear to him about his calling and direction.
 - The counsel of others, even well-meaning counsel, can be filtered through a human desire to spare loved ones from difficulty rather than through pure spiritual discernment.
 - Paul's arrest and imprisonment did not end his ministry. From prison he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, letters that continue to shape the church today.
 - The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. This is not merely a historical observation from Matthew 9 but a present and urgent reality.
 - Retirement from work can and should mean more time for kingdom service, not withdrawal from the battlefield.
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Opening Question

Take a few minutes before diving into the discussion to reflect individually. Then share with the group:

- Think of someone in your life who modeled finishing well in their faith. What did that look like, and how did it affect you?



Discussion Questions

Section 1: The Call and the Cost

Refer to Acts 9:15-16 and Acts 20:22-24

1. In Acts 9, Jesus told Ananias that Paul was a chosen vessel who would bear His name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel, and that He would show Paul how much he must suffer for His name's sake. Suffering was built into the call from the very beginning. How does knowing that difficulty can be part of God's plan change the way you respond when ministry becomes hard?
2. Paul told the Ephesian elders that chains and tribulations awaited him in Jerusalem, yet none of these things moved him. He said he did not count his life dear to himself. What does it look like practically to hold your life loosely in that way? Is there an area of your life right now where you are holding on too tightly?
3. Paul said his goal was to finish his race with joy and complete the ministry he received from the Lord Jesus. What would it mean for you personally to finish your race with joy? What would need to change in your current priorities to make that a realistic goal?

Section 2: Counsel, Confirmation, and Discernment

Refer to Acts 21:1-14

4. The believers at Tyre warned Paul through the Spirit not to go to Jerusalem. Agabus gave a prophetic word about what would happen to Paul if he went. Yet Paul went anyway, and the group ultimately responded by saying "the will of the Lord be done." How do you reconcile the idea that the same Holy Spirit seemed to be both warning Paul and compelling him to go? How do you personally navigate conflicting counsel when you are trying to discern God's direction?
5. The pastor noted that well-meaning people will often counsel you away from difficulty rather than counsel you toward obedience. Have you ever experienced a situation where loving advice pointed you away from something God was clearly calling you toward? How did you handle it?
6. Paul's response to the weeping and pleading of his friends was, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." What does this level of resolve require spiritually? What builds that kind of resolve over time?



Section 3: Overcoming False Impressions

Refer to Acts 21:17-26

7. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, the elders informed him that Jewish believers had been told he was teaching against Moses and against circumcision. These were false impressions, but they were widespread. Paul submitted to the elders' suggestion to participate in a purification rite to demonstrate the truth about his character and teaching. What does Paul's willingness to submit and to take practical steps to correct a false impression teach us about humility in ministry and relationships?
 8. The pastor described Paul as a completed Jew, someone whose Jewish heritage was not erased by faith in Christ but fulfilled by it. How does understanding the continuity between the Old and New Testaments deepen your own faith? Are there parts of the Old Testament you have avoided that you might benefit from exploring?
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Section 4: Running Through the Tape

Refer to 1 Corinthians 9:19-27, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, Philippians 1, and Matthew 9:36-38

9. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9 that he had become all things to all men so that by all means he might save some. He said he disciplined his body and brought it into subjection so that after preaching to others he himself would not become disqualified. What disciplines in your own life help you stay spiritually sharp and engaged rather than drifting toward passive observation?
10. From prison, Paul wrote to the Philippians that his chains had actually advanced the gospel and that the whole palace guard had heard about Christ. He reframed what looked like a catastrophic ending as a strategic opportunity. Where in your own life might God be asking you to reframe a difficulty as an opportunity for ministry?
11. Near the end of his life, Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4 that he had fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith, and that a crown of righteousness was laid up for him. He added that this crown would be given not only to him but to all who have loved the Lord's appearing. What does it mean to you personally to love His appearing? How does that hope shape the way you live today?
12. The pastor observed that Paul never contemplated retirement from ministry, and that the church today has a particular need for experienced, seasoned believers who will invest in children, youth, and new believers rather than withdraw to the sidelines. What gifts, experiences, or wisdom do you carry that could be invested in someone younger in the faith? What has held you back from doing so?



Practical Applications

Choose one or more of the following to act on before your group meets again:

- Pray specifically about the harvest. Jesus commanded His disciples to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send out laborers. Set aside time this week to pray that prayer with genuine intention, and ask God whether He is calling you to be part of the answer.
- Identify one area of unfinished obedience. Is there something the Holy Spirit has been prompting you toward that you have been putting off, perhaps out of fear, comfort, or the counsel of others? Write it down and bring it before the Lord in prayer this week.
- Invest in one person younger in the faith. Reach out to someone newer to the faith, whether a child, a teenager, or a newer believer, and offer to spend time with them. It does not need to be formal. A conversation, a shared meal, or an offer to answer questions about the Bible is a meaningful beginning.
- Attend or follow up on a ministry opportunity. If your church has a children's ministry workshop, a home fellowship need, or another open area of service, take one concrete step this week to learn more or express interest.
- Memorize 2 Timothy 4:7-8. Commit Paul's final words about finishing the race to memory. Let them serve as a personal benchmark for how you want your own story to read at the end.

Closing Reflection

Read Matthew 9:36-38 together as a group, where Jesus sees the crowds as weary and scattered like sheep without a shepherd, and calls on His disciples to pray for laborers to be sent into the harvest.

Close your time together in prayer. Ask God to stir each person in the group toward their next step of obedience, to give courage to those who have been hesitating, and to raise up laborers from within your own community who will run through the tape rather than withdraw from the race.

Memory Verse for the Week

2 Timothy 4:7-8 — Paul's declaration that he had fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith, and that a crown of righteousness awaited him and all who love the Lord's appearing.



5-Day Devotional:

5-Day Bible Reading Plan and Devotional Guide

Finishing Well: Running the Race to the End

Day 1: Called and Commissioned

Reading: Acts 9:15-16 — In these verses, the Lord tells Ananias that Paul is a chosen vessel appointed to carry God's name before Gentiles, kings, and the people of Israel, and that suffering will be part of that calling.

Devotional: God does not call us to comfort. He calls us to purpose. When the Lord commissioned Paul, He made no effort to hide the difficulty ahead. Suffering was woven into the assignment from the very beginning. This is a sobering truth for anyone who desires to serve God faithfully. Yet notice that the call came before the cost was counted. God saw in Paul not what he was, but what grace would make him. The same is true of you. Your past does not disqualify you. Your weakness does not eliminate you. God chooses vessels, not trophies. Ask yourself today: Am I willing to be used even if the path is hard?

Day 2: Bound in the Spirit

Reading: Acts 20:22-24 — Paul declares that he is going to Jerusalem compelled by the Spirit, fully aware that chains and hardship await him, yet he considers none of it worth comparing to finishing his race and completing the ministry entrusted to him by the Lord Jesus.

Devotional: Paul did not stumble into suffering. He walked toward it with open eyes because the Holy Spirit had made his direction clear. This is one of the most striking portraits of Spirit-led obedience in all of Scripture. Paul was not reckless. He was resolved. There is a profound difference between the two. Recklessness ignores counsel. Resolve weighs it and then submits to God above all. When those who loved Paul begged him to turn back, he did not dismiss their concern. He simply loved Christ more than his own comfort or survival. Today, consider what the Holy Spirit has been prompting you toward that fear or the counsel of others has caused you to delay.



Day 3: All Things to All People

Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 — Paul describes how he willingly adapted his approach to reach Jews, those under the law, those outside the law, and the weak, becoming all things to all people so that by every possible means he might save some.

Devotional: Paul's willingness to participate in the Nazarite purification rite at Jerusalem was not compromise. It was love in action. He understood that the goal of ministry is never to win an argument. It is to win a soul. His Judaism had not been erased by grace. It had been completed by it. He could move between worlds because his identity was rooted not in cultural preference but in Christ alone. This kind of flexibility requires deep security. When we are secure in who we are in Christ, we do not feel threatened by serving others on their terms. Where might God be calling you to lay down personal preference in order to reach someone who needs Jesus?

Day 4: Sorrow That Becomes Mission

Reading: Romans 9:1-5 — Paul expresses deep anguish over his Jewish kinsmen who have not yet believed, going so far as to say he could wish himself cut off from Christ if it meant their salvation, before recounting the many spiritual privileges that belong to Israel.

Devotional: The depth of Paul's compassion for the lost is almost incomprehensible. He was willing to sacrifice his own eternal standing for the sake of those who had rejected Christ and who, in the events of Acts 21, were actively trying to kill him. This was not sentiment. This was the love of Christ working through a surrendered man. Most of us struggle to pray consistently for one unsaved family member. Paul was willing to trade his eternity for an entire people. Ask God today to increase your compassion for those who do not yet know Christ. Let His grief over the lost become your grief. Let that grief become your mission.

Day 5: Running Through the Tape

Reading: 2 Timothy 4:6-8 — Writing from prison near the end of his life, Paul declares that he has been poured out like a drink offering, that his departure is near, that he has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith, and that a crown of righteousness awaits him and all who love the appearing of Christ.

Devotional: These are among the most triumphant words ever written, made all the more remarkable by where they were written: a Roman dungeon, awaiting execution. Paul did not finish strong because circumstances were favorable. He finished strong because he never stopped running. He never confused retirement with faithfulness. The harvest is still plentiful. The laborers are still few. Whatever your age or season of life, the race is not finished until God calls you home. The question is not whether you have served in the past. The question is whether you are still on the field today. Ask the Lord of the harvest what He would have you do with whatever time and strength remains.