

While growing up, did your parents ever say the same phrase over and over again? My dad always told us to “Put forth the effort.” There’s a few my boys have heard regularly from me and, recently, there’s one in particular they’ve been hearing a lot of the last few weeks. It’s “Finish strong”. It is a reminder and encouragement for them to keep going until the very end, and it’s an acknowledgement there are obstacles that will try to get in the way and prevent them from finishing. We are nearing the end of a challenging school year, I have a senior who is battling senioritis, my boys are fatigued, tired of staring at screens, the freedom of summer is beckoning, and all of that tempts them to stop short. So I encourage them to see it through until the very end, to finish strong.

Like my boys, followers of Jesus are on a course, running a race that has a finish line. That finish line could be the end of our lives, the end of a season God is taking us through, or the end of an assignment God has started in us that he wants to bring to completion. But like most students trying to finish the year well, we too can run into obstacles that get in our way. A retirement exclusively devoted to leisure, isolation, fatigue, persecution, fear, an avoidance of any suffering...all these will tempt us to stop short and not finish the race God has us in. Even Jesus had his moment in the Garden of Gethsemane where he asked the Father to take the cup, to stop short, but he saw it through until the finish, and so can we. But how do we do that? How do we finish strong?

[Acts 20:18b-25] “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.

Paul has been run out of Ephesus, visited the church in Macedonia, and now stops in Miletus to visit the Ephesian elders. He is on his way to Jerusalem, where he’s persona non grata, and where the Holy Spirit says he’ll find imprisonment and affliction. As he sees what’s between him and the finish line, he may be tempted to stop short. But he utters the phrase “If only I may finish.” That should be the cry of all followers of Jesus, and Paul will show us how to do that.

Follow the Spirit to the end. If we want to finish strong, we have to know *what* race we’re running and *where* the finish line is. We also have to decide *whose* race we’re running and understand what it means to win. Paul uses the word *dromose*, a Greek word that can mean race or mission. It gets translated “course” here, “race” in other passages. That’s what he wants to finish, and the race he’s running is one laid out by the Holy Spirit. Paul says he is constrained by the Spirit, literally “bound in the Spirit”, and that he counts his life as no value to himself. Paul knows that finishing strong means trading in his own agenda for God’s. He doesn’t know all of

what lies ahead, but he is entirely devoted to the purpose God has for his life, whatever may come. He goes forward in obedience and faith because he'd rather be faithful to God's purposes than waste his life on his own. **The worth of our lives is found in our relationship with and service to God.** Paul knows the race the Spirit has laid out for him, and he's all in.

“What every one of us needs is a cause to live for that accords with the purposes of our Creator. And because our Creator is breathtaking in himself and gracious toward his creatures, we can know beyond any doubt that his cause will satisfy our deepest longings for a life with thrilling significance.” -John Piper

What race are you running today? Whose race are you running today? What does it look like to finish? To win? We can choose so many things that set us down a different course than the one God has for us. We do it because we think it will fulfill us, or that it will avoid suffering, or that it will just be easier. But we miss out if we take that path. **Your life is valuable, eternally so, and God gave it to you to spend it on eternal things.** God wants to take you somewhere, but we've got to let him lead the way. The good news is that if we are constrained by the Spirit, we're all his, and he will not only direct our steps but carry, empower, and protect us as he takes us to the finish line. **To finish strong means to follow faithfully.**

Ensure the work continues after you're gone. As we've said since our series in Luke, success is defined by successors.

[Acts 20:28-32] ²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Paul knows he's nearing the end and doesn't think he'll see any of these elders again. So he takes this one last opportunity to pass on the work of the gospel and encourage these elders to lead the way by caring for the flock, protecting them from wolves, and **directing them first to God** and the Word of his grace. After he departs, this church will thrive for years to come. A few years after this moment, Paul will write the letter to the Ephesians and commend them for their faithfulness and love. However, about three decades later, as John writes the words of Jesus to the Ephesian church in the book of Revelation, to what is the second generation of this church, he accuses them of abandoning their first love, namely Christ. Paul finished strong by passing it on to their first generation, but those leaders failed to ensure the work continued after themselves, and the church suffered.

One of our elders worked for a big company here in Dallas and one day their CEO came in and said, "I want everyone to start training their replacement." He knew success would only come if successors had been established, for the work to continue when they were gone. It's the same for the church.

If you knew you'd be gone tomorrow, who would you engage today to carry on what you started? The gospel has been passed on by a succession plan from the Father to the Son, from the Son to the Twelve, from the Twelve to the early church, and over generations to you and me. We finish well when we pass it on to someone else before we're gone. This past ministry year our staff has focused on spending time outside of programs to spend time with our one, or ones. We have a display on the third floor with the names of those we are pouring in to so that we can celebrate and pray and remember why we do what we do. We are building towards a culture of relationally passing on our faith, and **everyone is invited!** Who is it for you? Kids, grandkids, coworkers, someone in this church? **To finish strong means to pass it on.**

Don't go it alone. We'll only get to the finish line if we have others running with us and cheering us on.

[Acts 20:36-38] ³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

Before Paul gets to Jerusalem, he first has to step on the boat that will take him there (will happen in 21:1). He has proclaimed his devotion to the Spirit and now has to live it out. Thankfully he doesn't have to do it alone. The Ephesian elders are no mere ministry associates. They are dear friends with whom Paul has a deep relationship (remember, he spent 2-3 years there), and their prayers, affection, and presence all the way to the ship emboldens him so he can press on. He heads to Jerusalem carried by the love, encouragement, and prayer of his friends.

I want you to watch a video of Charlie and Alistair Brownlee, two British marathon runners who happen to be brothers. Charlie was running the race with the finish line in sight, but he began to waver and there was no way he was going to make it on his own. His brother Alistair, the reigning Olympic champion, could have won, but chose to run a different race by carrying his brother to the finish line. And, along the way, the crowd was going nuts! Charlie finished because he was carried by his brother and cheered along by fans.

We'll never make it if we try to do it on our own. There have been times over the last three years where I've felt isolated but seen the finish line and chose to roll up my sleeves and make it happen on my own. Those times usually didn't end very well. I needed to ask others to run with me and cheer me on. When the obstacles come, and they will, God has given us one another to carry each other over, thru, and around them to get to the finish. You are surrounded by a family of God-ordained teammates and fans who want to run with you and cheer you on until the very end of the race. **The best way to finish strong is to finish together.**

Where's your finish line, what's in the way, and who's running with you?

We all have to determine the race we're running and who is leading the way. We are passionate about people discovering and living out the race we call God-given purpose, but there are a few things I want to focus on specifically.

First, for those of you on the last lap or so of your lives, we need you. I need you. We have a growing number of young people in our midst who need those who have gone before them to pass on their faith before they go, to talk about your own experience with obstacles, how you relied on the glorious grace of God and his people to get through them. The reason Paul was so effective in his witness and influence was because he had lived it well and became an example to the Ephesian elders. We know you didn't do it perfectly, but even in those imperfect times you experienced the grace of God and we need your help in learning how to do that. **You may be long past the years of having biological children but finishing strong could mean making a few more spiritual children before you reach the finish line.**

Second, Covid has been so disruptive, painful, trying that it's changed most of us, but we know God won't let it go to waste. I don't think I've talked to anyone who just shrugs off the last 15 months as not a big deal. Most everyone has been shaken, become introspective, has asked God "What now?" Don't stop that journey now that things are opening back up. Don't say "Whew, now we can go back to normal." Finish strong by letting God finish his work in you to get you on the other side and to the new normal he has for you.

Third, for our church, God is doing a new thing here. We have been in such a time of transition, have so many new faces, that it feels like a restart, like a renewal. **I believe God is leading us to a new day and a new way of being the church and doing church.** I'm listening, leading, and loving as best I can. I want him to lead the way. Lean into what God is doing here and follow him to the finish because I believe there are glorious days ahead of us.

A few years later, Paul wrote to his friend and disciple Timothy and commented on how he finished.

[2 Tim 4:7-8] ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Henceforth 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.

Paul stayed the course, followed the Spirit, and finished strong, allowing him to face his death with peace and his eternity with hope, confident that God would reward him for his faithful and fruitful life. All of us can live in a way that will allow us to say the same thing as we approach the finish line, even if that begins today. It's never too late to start finishing strong.