

“Understand How to Finish Well - Today”

2 Timothy 4:6-22

⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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.

If we're a follower of Jesus, I pray we would all like to say that at the end of our life. I suppose we might say it was easier for Paul since he knew his life would end shortly. Here he was, in a damp, cold prison cell huddled in a corner, trying to keep warm. He and Peter were imprisoned in the famous Mamertine Prison – still seen today under the Coliseum). It wasn't really a prison for long term prisoners; it was only a holding place for those being executed.

As he dwells on his soon beheading, he writes one final letter. In it we get an understanding of how we can finish well. You might be thinking, that's years away and I've got a long way to go before I can say 'I have fought the good fight and kept the faith.' But that's not really true. One, we don't know if our end is years away or days away no matter how old we are. Tragedies happen, we know too well.

The solution to problem with understanding how to end our time on earth well isn't in the future, its today. Here are two well-known verses that keep me balanced and make the future goal of finishing well a lot more attainable. The first is Jesus' words in Matt. 6:33-34,

^{6:33} But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

And the other is Lam. 3:22-24

²² Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. ²³ They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴ I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."

Jesus said primarily focus on the making the Kingdom of God your pursuit today because God has not given us His enabling grace and mercy for any other day but today. Therefore, if I want to finish my life well, then all I must focus on is to finish today well. And say in the course of one month that I could honestly say I lived about 20-25 of those 30 days well, then I will have grown spiritually, making the task of finishing well tomorrow a little easier than today. So then the challenge isn't so much how will I finish my life, but how will I finish today, so that I am laying the foundation that will enable me to finish life well?

In the first 3 chapters and the first 5 verses of Ch. 4, Paul is encouraging Timothy to persevere in ministry. To remember his gospel roots, to not be ashamed to identify with Paul or Jesus or the gospel, even though Nero was reigning. To teach and train others in the Word. To preach the Word and stay true to it. As obvious as this seems, we have to remember the circumstances Paul is in. He's awaiting death by beheading. It would be easy for him to be worried about himself but instead Paul finished his life, even as he awaited his own execution encouraging others to keep fighting the good fight. So if we want to finish today well then

We need to Encourage More than We Complain **(4:1-5)**

Instead of complaining about his own problems Paul encourages others. Instead of wanting sympathy from others he wants to help others stay committed to Jesus. Paul reminds Timothy (and ourselves) of our future assessment from Jesus on how we finished well when he says,

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

We are in the presence of God now and He hears all that we say and sees all we do. Yes, we're saved and we know we will spend eternity with Him, but 1 Cor. 3:10-15 and 2 Cor. 5:10 says He will judge our works. He hears my complaining and my critical spirit whether I mouth the words or not. Complaining and criticizing is pretty easy. It takes a Holy Spirit filled heart to say edifying things to others. Paul was concerned for Timothy and the gospel ministry in Ephesus (where Timothy served God). He wanted to see growth, spiritual fruit. So he encouraged Timothy to persevere because it's not easy. There's lots to complain about – and Paul had good reason as we'll see – but he chose to encourage more than complain.

The difficulty with encouragement is we have to be proactive; we have to think about others more than ourselves. Criticism and complaining is mostly reactionary. It reveals that our mind mostly dwells on ourselves. Paul reminded Timothy lots of people are going to fall away and not want the truth. You keep your head in all situations. And I believe that included encouraging other believers who were also discouraged and disheartened by those neglecting their walk with God.

Paul does talk about himself in vv.6-8, not in an arrogant way, but I believe as part of his encouraging Timothy to keep his head and persevere. He says these famous words:

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

Using vivid images, Paul will describe how his life didn't revolve around himself but around what Jesus Christ wanted. And that always a difficult challenge for us each day.

We Need to Follow God More than Ourselves **(4:6-8)**

Paul was following his own selfish goals of becoming the most respected Pharisee when Jesus confronted him on the Damascus Road in Acts 9. Salvation changed Paul. He said in Gal. 2:20 that He is crucified with Christ and the life he lives he no longer lives for Himself but for Christ who loves him and died for him. If I want to finish well today I need to set aside my selfish pursuits and follow Jesus because He loves me and died for me.

Paul uses a number of vivid images to describe finishing well. He says "I am already being poured out like a drink offering and the time has come for my departure." In Numbers 15 we read about the drink offering. It was a measured mixture of grain, oil and wine that was poured on the animal just prior to its being burnt up to God. Four times in Num. 15:1-13 it says that this offering is "an aroma pleasing to the Lord." Paul says his death is a pleasing aroma to God because it his life pleased God.

Another image Paul gives us is in the word "departure". It means a soldier is packing up his tent and moving on to his next assignment. Time to move out Paul says. I've got new marching orders!

Then he gives us some more word pictures in vv.7-8. Fighting the good fight is a reference to wrestling and the race is a reference to the marathon in the Isthmian games, the forerunner of the Olympics. In 1 Cor. 9:24-27 he uses this same image to illustrate the danger for those who are mere spectators when it comes to following Jesus and not competitors:

Do you 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. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No I beat my body and make it my slave [training] so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Followers of Jesus are to be competitors not spectators. We must get involved in serving God with our life. It is a spiritual fight, and it is an endurance race - a marathon, not a speed race. That's how we followers of Jesus finish well not just by competing but by completing what God has called us to do.

"I have finished the race" Paul says. "I have kept the faith." Too many don't finish well spiritually because they get sidelined by sin or laziness. They don't finish well because they didn't train. Back in 1 Tim. 4:7 Paul challenged Timothy, "train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."

We are in an endurance race that we must continually be training for. It is a spiritual battle, one in which Satan is often successful at discouraging us and causing us to sit on the sidelines. Faithfulness is not a popular word in our society. People give up so easily on their marriages, jobs, school, businesses. It's too easy to get a divorce, go on unemployment, claim bankruptcy. That's the way the world operates. Easy escape clauses. But followers of Jesus Christ are to show the work of the Spirit's enduring commitment to hang in there in our ministries, not give up, training ourselves to be godly, remembering that God said the difficulties and trials produce character and strength in us to complete the tasks God's called us to complete.

As Paul wraps up his letter he concludes talking about people. Mostly people who helped him grow but also a few who abandoned them. It's easy to become negative and complain about the ones who hurt us. Instead, like Paul

We Need to Grow in Grace Not in Resentment **(4:9-22)**

Paul mentions 18 people plus one household and a generic 'all the brothers and sisters'. We live with and serve with believers. We are all flawed. We all blow it at times in our endeavour to finish today well, let alone our life. But even when he mentions those who hurt him Paul doesn't dwell on it. He learned throughout his life that God extends so much grace to us that we must extend Godlike grace to others,

Forgiving those who hurt us (v.10, 14-18)

He mentions in v.10 Demas *having loved this present world deserted me and went to Thessalonica.*". Demas once worked along side Paul. We read in Col. 4:18 he said to the Colossians,

Col. 4:14 Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.

In v.14 here he says *"Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds."*

Then in v.16 he reminded Timothy that

¹⁶ At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.

¹⁷ But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth.

What about Luke, Timothy, Mark – even his friends? No one came. Did Paul resent them? No, he's talking to them, encouraging them, thanking them for their role in his ministry. He knows we all get hurt at times. He left it with the Lord. We've all been hurt by other believers and we have all hurt other believers. We can grow in resentment and become bitter or grow in grace, forgiving one another and become better. wouldn't you rather finish the day well by extending grace to someone even though they disappointed or hurt you, rather than building resentment and letting your heart get hard? If there are people you need to forgive who hurt you, do it quickly. Our unforgiving spirits only grieve the Holy Spirit, Jesus and God because we are to forgive each other as God forgave us.

But, as Paul knew, its not about us. He mentions someone's name here that might surprise us. *'Bring Mark with you for he is useful to me.'* He wasn't always. Mark joined Paul and Silas on their first missionary journey but left for home apart way through. When he, Silas and Barnabas were going to go on a second journey, Mark wanted to come. Paul said no way (Acts 15) but Barnabas said yes, and took him. Mark matured and to his credit grew in grace. As did Paul who forgave Mark a long time ago and now says *'I want him to come to me as I am about to die.'* So we need to

Reconcile with those we've hurt (vv.11, 20)

In v.20 Paul says

Erastus stayed in Corinth, and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus.

Did Paul feel bad about this? Why didn't he heal him, because he had healed a few? Did Paul get impatient? We don't know. But the Marks we hurt and the Trophimuses we disappoint are all people we need to reconcile with. If you want to end your life with healed relationships you need to do it sooner than later. Can you do it today? This week? Show you are growing in grace and forgive and reconcile with those you need to.

And of course don't forget to

Strengthen healthy relationships (vv.19-22)

What's on the mind of a dying believer? For Paul it was people. Have you ever noticed in most of Paul's letters he mentions near the end of his letters, 'Say hi to so-and-so?' And the impression you get is that these were not casual acquaintances, these were lasting friendships. Paul never stayed long in one area, but he invested his time and resources in people, who are eternal. But we don't as we should because we're too busy, we don't have time for eternal things. Maybe, like "Demas", we love the temporal things of this world more than relationships.

If we had to move away from here, what kind of memories would people have of us? Would we be leaving behind close friends, people who will miss us and the times of fellowship we had because we developed strong relationships? Or will they just wish us God's best and maybe never hear from us again? People are eternal.

If you and I are to finish well today then

We'll Need to look Forward More than Backwards **(4:6-8, 18)**

There are many things we enjoy to look back on, and wish we could but we can't change any of that. It's gone and done. But today and tomorrow is open before us. The possibilities to grow and be an encourager are endless. We can change how we finish by looking ahead. See how Paul looked ahead. He had fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith. That was done.

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

¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

He knew what was ahead; security, joy in God's presence, reward for faithful service. Every day we are closer to heaven. It will always come sooner than we expected. Paul knew death was a rescue because then he would be with the Lord!

Paul would die faithfully, being beheaded in 66 AD. But we don't know how Timothy finished, just as we don't know how we will finish. We will finish well in the future if we finish today well. That's all Jesus expects from us today. Finish today well.

Who will we follow today?

Who will we encourage today?

What relationships will we reconcile with and what relationships will we strengthen today?

All these are forward looking in and of themselves. I'm looking ahead at today and asking God how can I grow in grace and help others grow in grace? How can we help each other finish well today?

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