

Fighting To The Finish

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Prepared from the spoken message and lightly edited for readability. Scripture quotations and spoken phrasing are preserved as delivered.

Well, good morning. I'm so glad to be back with you all today. I always look forward to it. When Pastor Jarrett says, "Hey, can you preach over at North Klein?" Yes. And then I say, "What date?" And he says, "The 28th."

I'm always so glad to come back and be with you all. It's good to see you this morning.

We're going to be looking at a passage of Scripture that probably the majority of us know or are familiar with. It might be new to some, but it's 2 Timothy 4:7-8. This is the last in our series on fighting for what matters, and today we're going to look at fighting to the finish.

This is a passage by the Apostle Paul. We have verses 7-8 on the screen, but you have to start it all out with verse 6. Just listen to this. Take your copy of God's Word and open up to 2 Timothy chapter 4, whether it's on your phone, your iPad, or whatever you use for a copy of God's Word.

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

— 2 Timothy 4:6

He doesn't say, "Hey, you know, I'm getting close to the time when I'm going to leave this earth," or, "It's around the corner," or whatever. He says, "No, the time of my departure, the end of my life, when I'm going to finish the course - it's here. It's now."

The Apostle Paul didn't write these words from the comfort of his nice, comfortable home, a little cottage, sitting in his chair by the fire, or a comfortable office of some sort. No, he's writing these words from a cold, damp, depressing Roman prison cell. When you keep that in mind, what he writes here is extraordinary. This should be encouraging to all of us.

We're going to be able to identify with the Apostle Paul in at least one way, and hopefully in two ways. The first way everybody in this room is going to be able to identify with Paul is that one day we're all going to come to that point where we've finished our course.

I say that in funerals a lot. I say, "The one thing we all have in common here today, even though we're here to celebrate the life of this person, is that every single one of us one day will come to this day." It's an appointment that you can't skip, and every one of us will experience that.

Hopefully, the second way we can identify with the Apostle Paul is that because of his faith in Christ, because he was a redeemed soul, and because he was in a relationship with Jesus, he was able to say, "I've finished the race. I've finished the race."

All of us are going to be able to identify with him in the first way, but the only way we can possibly identify with him in the second way is if we're in the race. In other words, if we, too, are in a relationship with Jesus Christ and have a personal relationship with Him.

Let me read verses 7-8:

I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth 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.

— 2 Timothy 4:7-8

As Paul lays these words out, he's saying that he's been in a race, he's come to the end of his life, and now, in a sense, he can lay his head down one last time with no regrets. He's not rethinking that. He has no regrets. "I have finished the course."

Have you ever felt like giving up? Anyone want to come up here and tell us about it? No, I'm just kidding. Just kidding.

Everybody in this room knows what it's like to feel like giving up. It might have been only a couple of times. Maybe you're one of those really competitive people, and no matter what you're doing - it could be pickleball, it could be checkers, whatever - you say, "No, I'm not going to give up." You've got one piece left on the board, but you're still in the fight. You're still going to fight it to the end.

Even your type, I know, at some time in life has had something, some circumstance or difficult situation where you just no longer had the enthusiasm to finish the project, or there was discouragement, or whatever it may have been. Everybody here knows what it's like to feel like giving up. Whether or not you did give up is another matter, but everyone knows what it's like to feel that way.

You've probably heard the saying in one way or another: "It's not how you start out, but how you finish that counts." That's really true.

When you look at the Apostle Paul as he's writing these words, he's facing execution and writing to Timothy, but he doesn't sound discouraged. He doesn't sound depressed. In fact, he sounds victorious. He sounds jubilant. He's enthusiastic. He's sharing these words with such hope.

It's like what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:

O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?

— 1 Corinthians 15:55

He's saying, "I've come to this point in my life." Sure, he would have liked to keep living for their sake, because elsewhere Paul said, "It's better for me to go and be with the Lord, but for your sake it's better that I stay." Paul had completely reconciled in his heart that whether he was alive here on earth or face-to-face with Jesus, he was good either way.

He was also the one who said, "I've learned to be content in whatever circumstance." How many of us can say that today, no matter what the circumstance?

Notice he didn't say, "I just have this bent toward being able to do that. It's just part of my personality that I can be content no matter how bad things get." No, he said, "I've learned to be content in whatever circumstance."

I'm sure there were plenty of circumstances that came into his life before he learned that, and he would get frustrated, upset, depressed, or angry about them. Remember, Paul didn't start out the race very well. He didn't start out fighting the good fight. In fact, he started out by fighting against the good fight.

He was a Pharisee of Pharisees. He was very religious, and he thought he was doing the right thing. He thought he was really pleasing God by hunting down people who believed in Jesus, who were Christians and part of the church. He hunted them down with papers in hand and official authority, and he took them into captivity and sent them to prison.

Later on, when he was testifying before governors, he said, "I gave hearty approval, and some of them even died." That's what Paul's life was before he got saved.

I'm sure Paul sometimes had memories of grandparents holding back little children while they were screaming and crying for their parents, as their parents were being carried off to prison and they never saw them again. They did that at Paul's command.

You know how memories are. You know how sometimes you can get ambushed by memories? Has anyone here ever had a regret in life? Have you ever had something that, when you least expect it, suddenly comes from where that thought was filed away deep in the back and moves right to the front of the file? You think, "Oh, I wish I'd never done that," or, "I wish I'd never done it that way."

Imagine what it was like for Paul. He was personally responsible for the devastation of countless families and ruined lives of innocent people. He could never go back and change it. He could never go back and make it right. He could never go back and apologize. All he could do was claim the grace of God and how he was saved by grace.

Then he said in Philippians 3:

Brothers, I do not consider that I've made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.

— Philippians 3:13

When he says, "I do not consider that I've made it my own," he's saying that he hasn't acquired it perfectly. He doesn't do it perfectly every time.

But there's one thing he does: He forgets what lies behind and strains forward to what lies ahead. It's like a runner running a race who gets close to the finish line and puts his arms back and his chest out, using everything he possibly can to cross that line and touch that ribbon first.

Paul says, "That's the way I live life. I can't live in the past. I can't fix the past. But by God's grace, I'm forgiven,

and I'm pressing. I'm straining forward."

The Christian life isn't one where you put the boat on autopilot, set the motor, and just float down the stream. It would be nice if it were that way, but it's not. No, it's full of effort. In fact, Paul uses the words of a fighter.

Fight the Good Fight

The first thing we're reminded of is to fight the good fight. Paul says, "I've fought the good fight."

Notice he calls it a good fight. He didn't get bogged down with the wrong fights. We fight with people on social media, with our spouses, and with family members sometimes about such small things. We fight to protect our pride or our cherished causes.

But Paul says, "No, I'm talking about the good fight."

Not all the fights we fight are bad in and of themselves, but there's one fight that is excellent and above all else, and Paul refers to it as the good fight. He reminds us that the Christian life is a battle, but our true enemies aren't flesh and blood.

When he talks about our enemies, sometimes we see people as our enemies. He's saying, "Look, people are ultimately not your enemies." We don't wage war against flesh and blood.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

— Ephesians 6:12

He's talking about the spiritual battle. But we do sometimes battle against the flesh - our own flesh. Paul acknowledged that in Romans 7 when he said, "The very thing I want to do, I don't do, and that which I don't want to do, I do."

Has anyone ever experienced that? "I wish I wouldn't do that." We're struggling against the flesh.

Why? Because we come into this world selfish. Have you ever had to teach a small child how to say, "Mine"? We just come into this world knowing how to do that. "Mine. Mine. No, I don't want to." Self-centeredness - that's the flesh.

We spend a lifetime walking in the Spirit so that we don't fulfill the desires of the flesh. When Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, he says:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

— Galatians 5:22-23

Oh, you mean self-control isn't just a good discipline? No. It is one of the fruits of the Spirit when you're able to exercise it. You start with love and bookend it with self-control, with everything else in between.

He says if you walk in the Spirit, you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh. When we constantly look at the

desires of the flesh and say, "I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to do it," we're going to fail. He says to be preoccupied with Jesus and walking in the Spirit, and then you're not going to be focusing on the desires of the flesh. That's victory in Christ.

When he tells us to focus on that which is good, that which has a good report, and that which is beautiful and noble in Philippians, he says, "Let your mind dwell on these things." The ESV says, "Think about these things." I like the New American Standard Version better: "Let your mind dwell on these things."

What do we tell somebody who's always thinking about negative things and always being negative? We say, "Will you please stop dwelling on that?"

When your mind dwells on something, it means that's where you live. That's where your mind is living. He says, "Focus on the good things, the good fight. Let your mind dwell on these things."

We're in a spiritual battle, but it's a good fight, and it's worth it. It's not easy, but it's worth it.

Run to the End

Secondly, Paul says, "I have finished the race." He doesn't say, "I won the race," or, "I broke the world record." He says, "I finished."

The goal isn't to outpace everyone else around you, but simply not to quit. Don't quit. Don't check out. Don't stop.

I've been told by marathon runners - I say "I've been told" because I've never run a marathon, and I have no intentions of ever running a marathon - that there's a wall runners hit at around the 20-mile mark.

You run well for the first five miles and then 10 miles, and you say, "Man, I'm knocking this out. I'm going to win the race." Then you go 15 miles, and all of a sudden, you come around the 20th mile and it's like you hit the wall.

We've seen that sometimes in races, where the runner's legs suddenly get wobbly. They're going to the side, and they're trying their best. Sometimes another runner, a very conscientious and caring runner, will come alongside and help steady them a little bit and help them keep going, but they've hit that wall. Runners have to dig deep and find something inside to push through that wall and finish the race.

Some of you are old enough to remember the 1992 Olympics, when Derek Redmond, a runner for Great Britain, was running and suffered an injury. He collapsed, then got up and started hobbling. He was trying to make it while all the other runners were passing him by.

His father jumped out of the stands. You can see it on YouTube. His father, Jim, jumped out of the stands, came to his son, helped him up, put his son's arm around his shoulders, and helped him limp to the finish line.

The whole stadium was just going nuts. All the other runners had passed him, and obviously he came in last, but he crossed that line. They were crying, I was crying, and everyone was crying. It was so moving.

That was a perfect example. His dad couldn't just come up, tag him, and say, "Hey, I'll finish the race for you." No, it wasn't his race to run.

It's a perfect example of when Scripture tells us, when Paul tells us in Galatians 6, to bear one another's burdens. When you come alongside someone to help them bear a burden, you can't take their burden. That burden is theirs, and they've got to own it.

God gives every one of us a life to live, and we're the only ones who can live that life. We're the only ones He intends to live it. But when we come alongside, just like Derek's father did, we can help. It was still Derek's race to finish. He was the one entered into the race, and only he counted for that position, no matter when he came in.

When friends, family members, other Christians, and loved ones come alongside us while we're going through a difficult time, they can't take the burden. You know how sometimes, as parents, when our kids are suffering, we say, "I wish I could just take that pain they're suffering right now. I wish I could just take it"?

But guess what? We can't, can we? We can come alongside, hug that sweet little soul of ours, try to comfort them, and help them bear up under it.

So Paul says, "Run to the end."

There are several YouTube videos like this, but there's one I was watching just the other day. It's kind of funny. It was a high school race, and this kid was beating everybody, hands down. He got really cocky, turned around, and started waving at the people as he got close to the finish line.

The problem was that there was one line with all these triangles on it, but that wasn't the finish line. The finish line was another five yards away. He was waving, got to that line, and just walked off the track. He came in third because he turned around and realized, "I'm not at the finish line yet." He got arrogant, he was showing off, and he lost the race.

But Paul says, "Run to the end. Don't stop."

It will be hard. In fact, Jesus tells us in John chapter 8 - and I know this is in a redemption context:

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

— John 8:32

And what does he say in Romans 12:2?

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

— Romans 12:2

He's giving us insight into how to run the race. The race won't always be easy. Sometimes your lungs will be aching. You want to quit. You want to stop.

But he's already said, first of all, that it is a race worth running. Then he says, "Run to the end, and keep

focusing on what is true," because this is actually where the battle is. It's not in our bodies. This is where the battle is - in our minds.

He says, "Focus on that which is true," because if you don't, what can we assume? If focusing on what is true leads to freedom, what does believing lies lead to? Bondage. Bondage.

Focus on the truth. Run the race to the end.

Let me go back for just a second. We read part of Philippians 3:13, but listen to this as we read verse 14, too:

Brothers, I do not consider that I've made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

— Philippians 3:13-14

He uses two words that convey effort: "I strain forward," and, "I press on." I keep pressing. I keep pressing. I keep pressing. I don't give up.

Keep the Faith

Thirdly, he says to keep the faith. Paul says, "I've kept the faith."

To keep something implies that there are forces trying to steal it away. Every single day, the world tries to erode our trust in God. Disappointment, unanswered prayers, and tragedy all whisper to us that God doesn't care or, even worse, that He's not even there.

But He is.

Paul is saying, "I've kept the faith." Keeping the faith means protecting your relationship with God when it's easy, and especially when it's hard. It means holding on to His promises even when your current circumstances look messy.

We keep the faith by staying grounded in Scripture, persisting in prayer, staying connected to the body of Christ, and remembering what God has already brought us through. We sang about that a little while ago - thinking about what God has brought you through.

I've met with people struggling with anxiety. I've had folks come in, and I'll say, "What brings you in today?"

They'll say, "Well, I'm struggling with anxiety."

I say, "Tell me about it."

They say, "Well, I have anxiety, and I'm trying to find a way to overcome it and get rid of my anxiety."

I'll ask them to tell me about their life. They tell me about their life, and when they're finished, I'm like, "Well, I'd be more worried about you if you weren't anxious. So tell me about this anxiety. How long have you dealt with it?"

"Oh, ever since I was a kid."

"Every day, 24/7?"

"Well, no, not every day. Just sometimes."

"Tell me about those times."

"Well, when it comes on, I just can't think straight. I get anxious and all that."

"So what do you do?"

"Well, I guess I do something else or focus my mind on something else."

I'll say, "You know, it sounds to me like you've learned how to deal with your anxiety. The very fact that you're sitting right here 30 years later, and you said you've struggled with it all your life, means that somehow, in some way, you found a way to push through those times of anxiety."

I don't think it's realistic to say you're never going to be anxious again.

When you look at Matthew chapter 6, Jesus wasn't in the habit of talking about things that weren't real, and He's talking about anxiety. Can you believe that? "Don't be anxious about this. Don't be anxious about that. Your God in heaven knows what you need."

Then He comes down to the secret sauce, which is verse 33:

Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.

— Matthew 6:33

It's the modern way of saying, "Keep pressing into Jesus. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Keep focused on Jesus, and the other things will eventually fall into place."

Paul says in Colossians 3:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

— Colossians 3:1-2

Jesus looked up into the heavens when He was about to feed the 5,000 and prayed to God. He looked up into the heavens and prayed when He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. He looked up into the heavens when He prayed the priestly prayer in John chapter 17. Stephen looked up into the heavens intently when he was being stoned to death.

He says, "Don't focus on this. This is passing away."

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

— Hebrews 11:1

We also know that Scripture tells us we walk by faith and not by what? Sight. If you live your life only by sight, there's no faith required.

Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

— Hebrews 12:2

Keep the faith. Keep the faith.

Live for the Future

Finally, Paul says to live for the future. Paul shifts his gaze from his past to his future:

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness.

— 2 Timothy 4:8

Those who ran in the Greek Olympic races would be awarded with a little floral crown. Paul says, "Listen, nothing compares to the crown the Lord is going to award me."

He also says, "By the way, I'm going to appear before an unrighteous judge." That was going to be Nero, and Nero was going to take his life. But what Paul would be awarded by the righteous Judge lasts forever.

Paul could face his current suffering because he knew the ultimate reward. He adds a beautiful promise at the end, too. He says, "By the way, it's not just mine."

And not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

— 2 Timothy 4:8

That's you and me. That's you and me.

When I was younger, I was always afraid of dying. I guess when I became a Christian, I became less afraid of dying, but still, there was always some fear.

Anybody here looking forward to dying? I'm just curious.

Good. I'm not that weird.

I think it was D. L. Moody whom somebody once asked, "Are you afraid of dying?"

He said, "No, I'm not afraid of dying. I just don't like the process of getting there."

That's me.

I was always afraid of dying. Even when I became a believer, I became less afraid, but still, there was always some fear. But you know what? Now that I've had several loved ones who have finished their race, I'm like, "Well, they've done it. They finished the race. They kept the faith. What am I afraid of?"

*O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?*

— 1 Corinthians 15:55

Paul says, "This fight is the good fight, and it is worth fighting. It is worth it."

When you get to the end of your life, you won't care about how much money you made or how comfortable your life was. When you get to the end of your life, you'll care about this: Did I fight the right fights? Did I finish my race? Did I keep my faith?

Like I said at the beginning, there may be someone here today who hasn't yet entered the race. You might have all the running clothes. You might have the right shoes. You might have the best of intentions. But you haven't officially entered the race because you don't yet have a relationship with Jesus Christ. You can't win the race, and you can't fight the good fight, if you haven't yet entered.

Some of us may be discouraged. We're like Derek Redmond. We've been hit hard by life, and we just need that second wind. We've hit that wall, and we need someone to come alongside us, pray for us, and be there temporarily so we can be encouraged to stay in the fight and keep fighting.

Some of us are in the fight. We're fighting the good fight, and praise the Lord, we're reminded here by Paul's words that it's worth it. We can keep on. We can keep going because it's worth it.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we just thank You for these golden words that have been recorded for centuries. We thank You, Lord, for what Paul wrote. We pray, Lord, that we won't forget them too quickly. We pray, Lord, that they'll stay with us at least through today.

Lord, let us meditate on them. Let us be of good courage and be strengthened. Lord, let us always see the fight that we fight as the good fight, and let us remember that this race is worth it.

Lord, I give You this time, and I pray that all of us in this room, to one degree or another, will walk out the doors here just a little bit different.

Lord, we give You all the glory because You are the righteous Judge, You're the Savior, You're the Righteous One, You're the Counselor, and You are the Comforter. You're everything we need, and we praise You and thank You.

In Jesus' name, amen.