

Fight to the Finish
2 Tim. 4:6-8
SERIES “Fight”
Jarrett Stephens

We are concluding our *FIGHT* series today with a message I’m calling: **Fight to the Finish**

This is a message that would have been good for our USA Word Cup team to hear on Thursday evening in their last-minute loss to Turkey. The good news is we are at least moving on to the next round...AND our next game is the same time as our America 250 celebration.

So, we’ll celebrate America Wednesday evening and then rush home to hopefully celebrate an American victory in the World Cup.

We all know that starting well is important, but finishing well is what matters most. This is not just true in sports, it’s true in life, and it is FOR SURE true for the Christian.

I want to break this message up in three different sections this morning, and here is what I want us to see.

- I want us to see the “Call to finish strong”.
- I want us to look at the motivation Paul offers up to help us finish strong.
- And then in the last section (it will be the most practical), we’ll look at how to finish strong.

Let me set some context for you BEFORE we read our passage.

The Apostle Paul’s impending death is nearing. He is writing within weeks...perhaps even days of his martyrdom. Here is a man that’s been following Jesus for 30 years, and he KNOWS that outside of a miracle, he’s not making it out of the dungeon prison that he is sitting in.

And so, he pens what is his final letter...it will be the last words we have from Paul. They are directed to his “son in faith”, Timothy. And he has written him to encourage him.

2 Tim. 4:6-8 – “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ 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.”

Full disclosure here...this is my life verse. I want (v. 7) as my epitaph. No verse has challenged me more...encouraged me more...and I am ready to preach it this morning.

So, let’s get started and begin by looking at: **The Call to Finish Strong**

Any verses we read, we need to read in context. And up to this point in 2 Timothy, just look at some of what Paul has written to Timothy. This letter is mostly a letter of affirmation and challenge, and a charge to keep at it...to not stop!

We can't look at the entire letter, but let me give you an overview – maybe just a verse or two or three from each chapter!

2 Tim. 1:13-14 – “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.”

Hear the challenge...the charge...the call?!

2 Tim. 2:1-2 – “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus,² and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”

2 Tim. 2:22-23 – “So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.²³ Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.”

Paul knows his time is nearing and he's putting it all out there for Timothy.

Illus. Last Words – I preached this message one time and called it “last words” – when someone is dying you hang on to those last words...and that's what this letter is. It's “last words” and in these last words is this “call to finish strong”.

Paul plainly tells Timothy (Read 2 Tim. 3) – “It's going to get bad. In the “last days” evil is going to increase...people are going to oppose the truth. Finishing strong isn't going to be easy, but follow my example...continue to grow in what you were raised up in!”

And then we move to chapter 4. And Paul...again with this call...this challenge...this charge:

2 Tim. 4:1-2 – “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom:² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

The entire book is a call to finish strong...to endure...to persevere...to keep doing what God has called him to do.

Our text today begins in (v. 6), but look at **2 Tim. 4:5 – “As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of the evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”**

“Timothy...fight to the finish. Don’t give in. Don’t give up. (v. 6-8) is a call to finish strong. And he uses himself as an example. This is (v. 7) – “I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith – Timothy, you do the same!”
What Paul is doing for Timothy, he’s doing for us this morning. He’s calling us through his word to finish well.

Illus. Summer reading – Summer is here of course and I love summer reads. I tend in the summer to read without a pen in my hand...it’s more fiction and biography...more enjoyable and pleasure reads rather than prepping for a sermon – which btw – for the next several weeks we’ll have guests here filling the pulpit for me.

I’m so grateful you allow me the month of July out of the pulpit to recharge and refuel. I’ll still be around just not preaching, but we have some great messages coming up from some friends of mine from around the country as well as some of our staff – it’s going to be a great July.

I was in one of my summer reads and it mentioned a study that was done by Dr. Bobby Clinton of *Fuller Theological Seminary*. He spent years researching biblical and historical leaders to identify patterns of those who finished well AND those who did not.

Of the 49 biblical leaders Clinton studied less than 25% finished well. He mentions SIX barriers – what he terms the “what kills you” list – this is what in his study of biblical leaders prevents them from finishing well:

- Finances/greed (Gideon)...
- Abuse of power (Saul)...
- Pride leading to downfall (Hezekiah)...
- Illicit sexual relationships (Samson or Solomon) ...
- Family issues (Eli or Samuel) ...
- Plateauing (burnout)...

We see it in our world as well – it seems that many who start strong, for the reasons above and because of other reasons as well, don’t finish strong.

The call on our life is to fight to the finish...this means finishing strong - “Fight the good fight. Finish the race. Keep the faith.”

Secondly, let’s look at: **The Motivation to Finish Strong**

I take this mainly from (v. 8). Let’s look at it again.

2 Tim. 4:8 – “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.”

There is a motivation that keeps Paul moving forward no matter what he is up against. How is it that he can be in a dungeon prison and yet have a joy...a sense of purpose...a never giving up attitude?! It’s amazing when you think about it.

Well...Paul had an underlying motivation that aided him in putting one foot in front of the other. He kind of peels back the curtain here on what fueled him finishing strong...in a word...it's: REWARD.

“There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness...”

The words “laid up” carry this idea of its already set aside...it's stored away...it's reserved and waiting on Paul. He knows he is going to cross the finish line! He didn't when he started out...it's been a long race...not a sprint! But it's over and he is about to have his name called and reward given to him!

Illus. Half marathon

Paul used athletic imagery often in his writing. He talked about running to win the prize (1 Cor.). He talked about disciplining and training his body in the same letter. In (Phil), he writes about pressing on toward the goal.

Paul here in (v. 6-8) he calls life a “fight” – “I've fought the good fight” – He hasn't disqualified himself. He's competed...he's done what God has called him to do, and he is ready like in the athletic games of the day to receive his reward.

He gets a “Stephanos” – a crown! It was a laurel wreath an athlete who won the contest would get – Paul says, “it's a crown of righteousness I'm after!”

This is what kept him going...and look...it wasn't just the crown that motivated him...it was who was going to give him the crown!

2 Tim. 4:8a – “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day...”

Point of interest here...intrigues me that Paul is awaiting the sentencing of a Roman magistrate but the only verdict he is concerned with and consumed with is the one the “righteous judge” is going to hand down!

He is motivated to fight to the finish and to finish well, by this reward that awaits him...and he says, it's doesn't just await him – it awaits ALL of us who “love his appearing”.

Notice: The crown is NOT for the fastest, most impressive runner...it's for the one who is running after a person – Jesus himself! This is what it means to “love his appearing”. The person that receives the “crown of righteousness” is the one who longs to see him!

- What kept Paul going was this future reward!
- What kept Paul focused was this future reward!

- What kept Paul from getting in the ditch or going off the deep end or pursuing some false advertisement from the evil one is that his focus was on his future reward!

I'd just pause here and ask, "where are your eyes today?" If you are thinking about giving up or giving in...if you are tempted to get out of the race or stop running all together, I want to ask this morning, "Where is your focus?"

What's motivating you? Go back, and let's just look again at the six barriers that prevent someone from finishing strong...the "what kills you list" from Dr. Clinton's study:

I'll put them on the screen for you:

1. **Finances/greed**
2. **Abuse of power**
3. **Pride leading to downfall**
4. **Illicit sexual relationships**
5. **Family issues**
6. **Plateauing (burnout)**

If the temptation to quit moving forward in your faith is real today, it could be that your motivation is off. Paul wasn't focused on any of these things.

- Money didn't move him!
- Power? He didn't have any from a worldly standpoint and the power he had spiritually, he used it to serve others!
- Pride – it's hard to have pride when you are in a dungeon prison and forced to rely on others for your basic needs to be met.

Illicit sexual relationships? Paul was so focused on penetrating darkness and advancing the Kingdom, he didn't have the energy for that jive. We don't know much about his family life, and he certainly wasn't burning out...he had a reward he was after – that was to be given to him by Jesus!

THIS is what he was after and he was encouraging Timothy (and me and you) – that if we want to finish strong our eyes need to be NOT on the things of this world, but on the eternal prize – the future reward that awaits us.

So far, we have seen: "The Call to Finish Strong. The Motivation to Finish Strong".

Now, let's look at: **How to Finish Strong**

In looking at Paul's life and what he writes here in (v. 6-8) how can we practically finish strong.

1. **We need to live with the end in mind**

Illus. Shane and Shane – Several weeks ago, I was at a conference in Florida. I had received a phone call before the conference to come be a guest on their Worship Initiative Podcast. This is a cool thing they do!

You can text “DEVO” to 79316 and get a 10-15 min devo every morning with a song attached to it. Well, they asked me to be a guest on there. I was going to be at the conference so I said yes (tell story) – “give me Jesus”.

I said, “I don’t know if it’s my line of work or just something I am sensitive to, but I think about the end often. And at the end of the day, this is all that matters – our relationship with Jesus.

The psalmist wrote in **Psalm 90:10** – **“The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.”**

Illus. 48th Birthday - I turned 48 earlier this month. Debbie and I will be celebrating our 24th year of marriage in November. We are in the process of sending our second off to college. I say all this to emphasize that I am acutely aware of the how quickly time seems to be passing by...I’m super sensitive to it these days.

I mean I can remember when my mom turned 40 and her friends through her an “over the hill” party. I came home and there was a wheelchair in the living room. Funny joke by her friends, but I remember thinking in my mind that she was old. 40...that’s ancient!
And here I am two years away from fifty...some call that entering your “golden years”!

I was talking to a friend that I had graduated college with around my birthday, and we were talking about birthdays and just how fast they seem to be coming and we were talking about how strange it feels to in all likelihood have less birthdays in front of us than we do behind us!

Like you, I can look at pictures from years ago and it seems like it was just yesterday or at the most several years ago and I look at the time stamp and see, “no, that was a decade ago.”

It’s sobering, isn’t it? And for me as the days pass and the years go by (fast and faster it seems) I am more and more thinking about the finish.

Paul told Timothy, “I’m getting ready for my departure (v. 6). The word, “departure” here is the same word used to describe a ship setting sail...it’s the picture of a soldier striking his tent at the end of battle.

We need to live TODAY thinking of THAT day. When we will depart...set sail...strike our earthly tent and go home. This will help us finish well.

I look at that “what kills you” list...we’ll put it on the screen again:

- 1. Finances/greed**
- 2. Abuse of power**

3. **Pride leading to downfall**
4. **Illicit sexual relationships**
5. **Family issues**
6. **Plateauing (burnout)**

If we fall prey to any of these things, we're not thinking of that day!

Illus. Read through the Proverbs – Prov. 5-7 is about #3 on that list – illicit sexual relationships. I've got the names of men - pastors listed out in my Bible by these Proverbs that have failed in this area. Every time I read them it's a reminder to pray for them and it's also a warning to me.

If we fail to live with the end in mind, we'll get caught up and led astray and we need to remember the cost of NOT finishing strong.

Illus. Randy Alcorn - I share this sometimes in men's conferences. Randy came up with a list of what would happen should he fail morally. It's sobering!

He calls this "The Consequences of a Moral Failure" list and he takes it out and reads it from time to time.

- Grieving the Lord who redeemed me.
- Dragging his sacred name into the mud.
- One day having to look Jesus, the Righteous Judge, in the face and give an account of my actions.
- Following in the footsteps of these people whose immorality forfeited their ministries and caused me to shudder: (list names)
- Inflicting untold hurt to Nanci, my best friend and loyal wife.
- Losing Nanci's respect and trust.
- Hurting my beloved daughters, Karina and Angie.
- Destroying my example and credibility with my children, nullifying both present and future efforts to teach them to obey God ("Why listen to a man who betrayed Mom and us?").
- If my blindness should continue or my wife be unable to forgive, perhaps losing my wife and my children forever.
- Causing shame to my family ("Why isn't Daddy a pastor anymore?").
- Losing self-respect.
- Creating a form of guilt awfully hard to shake. Even though God would forgive me, would I forgive myself?
- Forming memories and flashbacks that could plague future intimacy with my wife.
- Wasting years of ministry training and experience for a long time, maybe permanently.
- Forfeiting the effect of years of witnessing to my father and reinforcing his distrust for ministers that has only begun to soften by my example but that would harden, perhaps permanently, because of my immorality.

- Undermining the faithful example and hard work of other Christians in our community.
- Bringing great pleasure to Satan, the enemy of God and all that is good.
- Heaping judgment and endless difficulty on the person with whom I committed adultery.
- Possibly bearing the physical consequences of such diseases as gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia, herpes, and AIDS; perhaps infecting Nanci or, in the case of AIDS, even causing her death.
- Possibly causing pregnancy, with the personal and financial implications, including a lifelong reminder of my sin.
- Bringing shame and hurt to these fellow pastors and elders: (list names)
- Causing shame and hurt to these friends, especially those I've led to Christ and discipled: (list names)
- Invoking shame and life-long embarrassment upon myself.

He's living with the end in mind. To put it in Paul's language, he's got a reward he's after and sometimes it's really helpful to be reminded in tangible ways of what NOT finishing strong looks like.

Illus. Neal Jeffrey family pic – I've got a preacher buddy that whenever we hear of a pastor falling, we send each other this pic (explain) – this is what real success is!

Listen...this life is a vapor! We are here today and gone tomorrow! If we want to finish strong, we must live with the end in mind because the end will be here faster than any of us realize!

2. We need to not be surprised by life's challenges.

Paul called life a "fight". It's a battle...and it's going to be this way until Jesus comes or calls us home. I feel like we talk about this a lot...we mentioned it in our sermon on fighting through suffering recently – it's this idea that suffering...tough times...refine our faith...purify our faith.

If we're not careful, when we find ourselves in a tough spot...a trial comes...a dark night hits...we walk through the valley of the shadow...if we're not careful, we can give up on God. We can be tempted to throw in the towel and quit on God.

We throw ourselves a pity party...woe is me...why is this happening...and it's like we're shocked that we as a follower of Christ and lover of Christ have to experience heartache and pain.

It can really discourage us, shortcut our faith and prevent us from finishing strong.

I want to encourage you in this to NOT be surprised by life's challenges. Paul said this life we are in is a "FIGHT". This word "fight" here that Paul uses...it's where we get our English word, "agony" from.

This is life...its one, long agonizing fight...and the quicker we realize this, come to grips with it and refuse to be surprised by it, the greater our chances are of finishing strong.

Why? Because we expect it. We're ready for it. We're willing to go through it. Interesting in this passage...that wording Paul uses in the first part of (v. 6) – “I am already being poured out as a drink offering...”

The drink offering was part of the sacrificial system in the Old Testament. At the conclusion of the sacrifice, the priest would take wine and pour it out at the base of the altar – that act of “pouring out” brought the offering that was being put forward to completion.

And this is the word picture Paul uses here to describe what he's experiencing...AND in the tense of the Greek here it suggests God is the agent of the pouring.

In other words, Paul had so surrendered his life to God, if the Lord wanted to pour him out as a drink offering, so be it! Paul is able to finish well because he's not shocked by what he's having to endure. He signed up for it!

If we want to finish well, we don't need to be surprised by life's challenges:

- this is what grows our faith...
- it's where the glory of God is on display (talked about this a few weeks ago)...
- it's also life's hardships and challenges that gets us ready to go home – isn't that true?!

Stay here long enough...see your friends and loved ones go through hurt and pain and death...you start longing for a better home too.

3. We need to remember the people in our lives that are watching us

I won't stay here long, and I confess this isn't explicitly in the text, but it is for sure seen on every page of this letter and that is Paul's love for Timothy and his concern for the churches he's planted.

Part of what helps Paul finish strong is he knows people are watching him...he knows people are praying for him and cheering him on in this fight.

He has people in his life that he doesn't want to let down.

Illus. Frame in hotel room – I'm fighting for them!

Neal Jeffrey at my ordination – “I'd be so disappointed...”

- I don't want to bring shame to the Stephens name...
- I don't want to bring reproach to Champion Forest...

- Most of all I don't want to bring reproach to Jesus...

Champion Forest, let's fight to the finish...and let's live in such a way that when we breathe our last, we can say with the apostle Paul, "I've fought a good fight, I've finished the course, I've kept the faith."

Will you pray with me?

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.

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