

LIFE: Finish Strong

Finish Strong

By Dr. Jeff Meyers

Bible Text: 2 Timothy 4:6-8; Revelation 4:9-11

Preached on: Sunday, December 9, 2012

I want to encourage you to turn to the book of 2 Timothy chapter 4. As you are turning to 2 Timothy chapter 4 there is also another passage of Scripture. We are not going to get to it until the very end of the message, but it is the book of Revelation chapter 4. So, 2 Timothy chapter 4, and Revelation chapter 4.

If you are a first time guest or visitor or maybe you haven't had the privilege of being with us in some time, we have been spending several months walking through a specific book of the Bible for a very specific reason. It is the book of 2 Timothy. Chronologically speaking it is the last letter of the apostle Paul.

We have an individual who has given over 30 years of his life to the preaching and the teaching and the living of the message of Jesus Christ. He comes across a young man by the name of Timothy. If this were to be a dramatic presentation, you and I are the Timothy in the story. We are the person who no matter what our physical age is we have come upon what I call theological hard times. We look at the world around us and we are having a theological quandary. Are we making any difference at all? As a distinct light, does it even put a dent into the entire equation? And there tend to be times where we get down in the mouth and frustrated and wonder: Is this thing called life even making a difference?

We have entitled this message series LIFE, because who better to instruct us on how to live life than the apostle Paul, one who did exactly what this passage says today.

If you haven't been with us the first couple of chapters just kind of give us an overview that as a believer in Jesus Christ we were never fashioned, we were never formed, we were never purposed to be changed by the world, but to change the world. Chapter 3 allowed us to see that the first position we need to take is a defense position, not defensive as in passivity, but defensive as in saying no longer would the world come into my life, no longer will temptation or sin have any more ground.

And as we come to chapter 4, to the climax, to the fourth and the final chapter we find out how to engage, how to embrace the culture, how to technically go on offense.

Last week we addressed that the first step of an offensive maneuver in our faith is taking a stand. It is standing for truth, standing against that which is false, the truths of God's Word in every aspect of our lives.

Coming on the heels of last week we now come to verses six through eight and what we are going to see today is not just that we need to stand strong, but we need to do what the apostle Paul did and yet very few people ever do, and that is to actually finish strong.

This is the challenge today. And as we are going to see in just a moment, studies have been done throughout time, particularly in light of the biblical characters, that show very few biblical characters finished strong. Very few historical characters finished strong. And very few of your contemporaries ever finish strong.

As you turn with me to 2 Timothy chapter 4, beginning in verses six through eight, we are going to learn today, we are going to discover this truth. How can we finish strong? How can we come to a point in our life whether it is at our funeral service or a time where people are remembering us when someone would say these words? They finished strong.

Second Timothy 4:6. The apostle Paul says these words:

For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.¹

This is a very famous passage of Scripture. Even if you have never studied 2 Timothy or even if you have never “been in Bible studies” or church much you have heard this phrase of “fighting the good fight” or “I have finished my course.” “I have finished my race”. It is almost as if the apostle Paul is writing his epitaph for his own tombstone. He is declaring literally in the days awaiting his martyrdom how he finished his faith strongly.

How do you and I do this? How can we one day, maybe not these exact words, say these same things about ourselves or have somebody write them for us?

I am going to give you three steps today to understand how you, how I, how any believer in Jesus Christ can finish strong. The first thing is this. We have to understand the race. Now forgive me. I know that I am a sports fan, but understand that the apostle Paul uses lots of sports illustrations in his writings, ok? I am convinced that because Scripture is inspired by God that the Lord is a sports fan as well. He says here that I have finished the course. I have run my race.

Well, in order to finish the race, in order to finish the course, we have to understand what the race even is. And the first thing I want you to understand about finishing the race is this, that you must have a starting position or a starting point.

Now I know that sounds elementary and I know it sounds very rudimentary to some of you, but you cannot finish a race that you never start. It is impossible. You cannot be a part of a race which you have never entered. The last time I checked it doesn't matter if it is auto racing. It doesn't matter if it is Olympic racing. It doesn't matter if it is swimming. It doesn't matter what it is, you cannot finish a race you do not start.

¹ 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

When the apostle Paul says he has finished his course, he has finished his race, he is not speaking about the fact that every human being eventually dies. He is not talking about the race of existence. He is not talking about the race of “physical life.” What he is saying is that there was a starting point in his life. It wasn’t when he was conceived. It wasn’t even when he was a child, but when he was older in his years, possibly late 20s, early 30s. We don’t know. The book of Acts chapter 9 says that he was living his life in complete rebellion against God. He didn’t care about the things of God. What he cared about was getting what he wanted, when he wanted it and how he wanted it. The Bible calls that sin. And he was living in sin, so much so that to get his attention on the road to Damascus, on the road to actually eliminate and to imprison and to kill those who believed in Jesus Christ, the Bible records that he saw a light come from heaven. It knocked him down, put scales on his eyes and he had a conversation with the risen Jesus which went something like this. “Paul, Paul, why are you persecuting me?”

And the Bible records in Acts that Paul had an incredible salvation experience in which he went from being a persecutor of those of the faith to actually being a preacher of the faith of Jesus Christ.

When he says, “I finished my race,” he is not talking about existence. He is talking about a personal relationship with the risen Jesus Christ. It must have that starting point. Do you understand that this means that the majority of people in our world, the majority of people in our culture, the majority of the people anywhere you go are running a race with no finish line?

Now, ultimately, everybody dies. I get that. But according to the apostle Paul he is saying, “When I finish my course, when I finish the race, when I have fought the fight,” he is saying that most people never even start the race that matters. There must be a starting point if there is ever going to be a finish line. If we are ever going to have somebody, ourselves or somebody else, say, “They finished strong,” you cannot finish a race you do not start.

Some people start it when they are seven or eight years old. Some people start it when they are in their 70s. It doesn’t matter when it started. But it has to be started. And the apostle Paul makes it clear when he says, “I finished my race,” that it was started at a point in his life.

But the second thing about his race, which is probably where we are going to spend most of our time today, is this struggle of the race. You get the idea; you get the athletic metaphors that are going through here that this is a difficult process. When he says, “I finished my race, I finished my course,” you get the idea that he is also saying, “And there have been many who have not.”

When you continue reading in 2 Timothy he talks about those who used to go alongside him who are no longer there.

Some years ago there was an individual who did a study of the Bible, of the men and the women whom you would consider leaders, judges, prophets, prophetesses, all of these folks from Genesis to Revelation, over 1000 different individuals. And according to this individual the way he did his study was he wasn't so much interested in how they started, like a Rahab, but how did they finish? And in his analysis of over 1000 biblical characters less than 25 percent of them finished strong. Less than 25 percent.

Why? Because it is hard. It is a struggle. I will be honest with you. This is a phrase that my wife and I use all the time with people, "Getting saved is easy." You have just got to come to the end of yourself and say, "Jesus, you are the answer and I am not." Living it is tough.

You think about a race. Getting in the blocks, hearing the gun go off and taking the first step, that is the easy part. It is 400 meters later when you are huffing and puffing or whatever analogy that you want to use.

Some years ago there was a famed pastor by the name of John Basigna and John was a young man in his late 20s and his father-in-law was a pastor. And he was bragging about his friends in ministry and talking about these guys whom he had gone to school with and was preaching alongside. He was bragging to his father-in-law. He said, "We are going to be an incredible generation of men for Jesus Christ."

His father-in-law, much like the apostle Paul, was wise and had the grey hair that Proverbs talks about that is the strength of the old man. And he said, "Son, I hate to tell you, but most likely, most of those friends of yours aren't going to finish strong and he challenged him. He took out a Bible and wrote down the names of all of his friends that he considered committed Christians.

Some of them were preachers. Some of them were laymen. Some of them were just those whom he said are completely sold out for the cause of Christ in their lives. When he retired, in one of the last sermons that he publicly preached he brought out that old Bible. He turned to the page where he had written the names and almost every name had been scratched out. Some because of ethical, moral issues, some because they just quit, some because they just were tired of running. And that is the struggle.

Now let me make a theological statement real quickly. Ok, I am going to take a step back. I believe the Bible is very emphatic. First John 5:13 is correct. If we believe on the name of the Son of God we might know that we have everlasting life. John 10:28 is true. Jesus said, "Those who believe in me no one or nothing will take them out of my hand." And so when I say that most people don't finish strong, do not hear that most people who claim to believe in Jesus fall away from their faith and are burning in hell. That is not what I am saying. What I am saying is most believers stumble across or fall across the finish line rather than actually running through the tape.

So this struggle happens. In fact, I mentioned these athletic metaphors. You know, the

apostle Paul was famed for using these. And there were two metaphors that he used that I think are apropos in this study. One of them was boxing.

Now I think for those of you who have ever tried your hand at boxing, particularly with the military background that some of you have, kudos to you. That is an insanely difficult sport. I cannot imagine going 15 rounds. I know now they have changed it to 12 rounds in the professional ranks. It is incredible what someone has to endure in a boxing match.

You know in the famous movie *Rocky*, the original *Rocky* that won the Academy Award, in that last round where Rocky Balboa is going in the ring he cannot even see. His eye is all covered up because of the swelling. Remember he turns to his manager. He says, "Cut me. Cut me." In other words, gash the skin so the blood can release so I can at least see something.

But do you know that the boxing match that the apostle Paul alludes to is in 1 Corinthians 9? And he talks about shadow boxing. He talks about being in a boxing match with your own shadow. And the idea is that sometimes when we go to box our shadow, we are our own worst enemy.

You know, sometimes when it comes to finishing strong there is nobody to blame but the person in the mirror. You can get upset about a circumstance or a situation, but in 1 Corinthians 9 he talks about boxing. He talks about warring and fighting and he says that those who can overcome this obtain an incorruptible crown and those who don't, a corruptible crown. And he basically mentioned that sometimes the struggle of finishing strong isn't somebody else's fault. It is not the devil's fault. It is the very fact that the only one who hit us or struck us was our own feeble flesh.

There is another analogy that he uses in Ephesians 6, this is the sport of wrestling. We are all about wrestling. I mean, you have to have several individuals, at least two, who are engaged in a very incredible process of physical strength and stamina. And yet he says in Ephesians 6 that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers and the rulers of darkness. And he goes to talk about the putting on the sword and the shield and the breast plate of righteousness and all this spiritual armor. And I think what the apostle Paul is trying to give us in these previous illustrations is that it is an intense struggle to finish strong.

Have you ever seen a boxing match go now all 12 rounds? That when the ring master lifts the hand of the victor up it is almost completely limp. They are worn out in the flesh, but they are victors in the ring. If you have ever seen an Olympic wrestling match when the gold medal is given, at the end of that gold medal match they usually don't jump up and celebrate, because they are usually too exhausted from the battle. And because of the exhaustion and because of the difficulty that it is to finish strong, unfortunately the majority of believers in Jesus Christ either limp or fall across the finish line. That is the race that we run.

If we understand that, then we now have to take a step back and say, “Ok, if we understand the race, now we need to understand what is my responsibility in this race?”

Well, the apostle Paul beginning in verse 6 says, “I am now...” In three verses he uses the word I or me eight times. The first thing you need to know about your responsibility in finishing strong is that you have a personal responsibility. It is your race to finish. And your race may not be your neighbor’s race. And your neighbor’s race may not be the race of the person down the street. And I think often times that on a personal level people do not finish strong because they do not understand that God calls each and every one of us to a unique race to run for him. We are all saved by faith in Jesus Christ. He then just gives us a different lane in which to run.

Let me share with you how people mess up their race. There are two ways that you can do this. The first way is this. Become distracted by how somebody else is running. You get so caught up in what God gives them the opportunity to do, that you never relish what God has given you the privilege of being and doing.

You know, the Lord gave us a parable of the talents. One got five, one got two and one got one. And in the end when the Lord came to receive, he expected every one of them to produce the same multiplier. He did not say to the one who had two, “Oh, you pitiful, poor person. I expected 10 just like the guy with five.” But that is how we get distracted. We say, “But the Lord has only equipped me to do this.”

Do you realize that that is what he expects you to do?

In just a minute this is going to become incredibly vital to the discussion here when Paul says he has finished his course. But often times we get distracted, because we say, “But that is the part of the body I want to be.”

Often times you find yourself as a pinky toe. You say, “You know, but I am just a pinky toe in the body of Christ. Nobody notices me. I always get stumped on the furniture and I am really dirty and black half the time. I am just the pinky toe. It is nasty down here.”

Have you ever tried to walk without a pinky toe? The rest of the body will be kiltered. The pinky toe is just as valuable to God as the mouth. And we get distracted because what we do is we use human standards to compare our race to somebody else’s. But there is another thing do. We get discouraged. Why do we get discouraged? Because the race doesn’t look like what we expected it to look like. Hello. That is called life. It doesn’t look like what you thought it would look like and it never does and it never will, so just get over it.

I can’t tell you how many times I have talked to people and they begin by saying, “This is not what I thought it would be.” It never is.

How about Isaiah? The famous chapter, Isaiah chapter 6. The Lord comes to him and says, “Who will go for me? Whom shall I send?”

“Oh, send me, Lord. I can’t wait. I can’t wait to preach to hundreds of thousands of people. This is going to be incredible.”

Do you know what the Lord tells him? For three years you are not going to have a single convert. Nobody is going to pay any attention. In fact, you can take your clothes off and run around naked. That is what the Bible says. And nobody will pay attention.

Now about Jeremiah? If anybody could have griped, do you know what the Lord told him? I do not allow you to be married. I am sorry. You cannot have the comfort of a spouse and a family, not for you. That is why he wrote the book of Lamentations. I am kidding. It is a joke. Don’t believe it.

But can you imagine? Often times in our flesh we say, “But this is what I wanted it to look like. This is not what I wanted it to look like.”

Can you imagine Isaiah coming back to the Lord and going, “Excuse me. I know I said yes, but...” Can you imagine Jeremiah coming back and saying, “I know I said I would do this, but I really had my eyes on her and you just messed up that plan.”

Why? Because we get discouraged, because in our flesh we have expectations of what we think our race should look like. Often times we say, “Well, I want to run the 100 meters. I want to be a sprinter.” And the Lord says, “No, you are running a marathon.” Or maybe sometimes we say, “Well, I want to be a middle racer.” He says, “No, I need you to be a sprinter.” And so we get distracted. We get discouraged and we end up not even running our own race.

But there is another thing we need to understand about our responsibility, not just our personal response, but what I want to call the paradox of the race. Eight times in this passage he says, “I am ready, my race. I kept the good fight. I finished my course. I have kept the faith.”

Here is the paradox. Athletic metaphors all over this passage, athletic metaphors all over the writings of Paul and there is not an athlete in the world who finishes their race or accomplishes their event all by themselves, not a one. Golfers even need caddies in the pro ranks. Tennis players. You say, “Well, that is an individual sport.” No it is not. How do you play unless you have got somebody to play against?

There is always somebody else involved. Yes, he finished his course. Yes, he finished his race. Go back to that illustration of the pinky toe and the mouth. Do you realize that the other parts were so necessarily important to his race? And this is the paradox, that we are accountable to the race we run. We are accountable to finish strong. But everybody around us in the faith of Jesus Christ needs us to finish our race as much as we need them to finish theirs.

Let me give you an example. Acts chapter 9 the apostle Paul gets saved, right? A few verses later he has got scales over his eyes. He is in an individual's home and the Lord comes to a man by the name of Ananias and says, "I need you to go touch his eyes." Later on in verses 24 and 25 the apostle who can now see is actually preaching the message of Jesus. The Jews whom he used to be on the side of are not happy with what he is doing. They want to kill him. And a group of disciples actually take him over the wall.

Can you imagine if the Lord came to you and said, "I have only got one job for you and this is it. One day for 20 minutes I need you to take a guy with a rope and put him over a wall."

You are thinking to yourself, "Well, that is not very glamorous. That this not real exciting. Man, that is... I want to say that kind of stinks."

Well, what would have happened if those guys had not run their race? Then the apostle Paul would not have been put over the wall to run his.

Do you know, the apostle Paul was out preaching on three journeys. You know, I am sure he got discouraged. You know whom the Lord brought in his life? A man by the name of Barnabas to encourage him.

How many times do you read the letters of Paul where he says, "Thank you of praying for me?"

How about Luke the physician according to Colossians 4:14 who took care of him when he was beaten several times and left for dead? Do you understand? Luke's race was with a scalpel and Band-Aids. Barnabas' race was with a good attitude and a group of unknown guys race was with holding a rope, but every one of them had a race and when they got one day before the Lord—and we talked about this last week—I promise you the Lord did not look at those guys who held the rope and say, "Hey, why didn't you convert millions?" I bet he said, "Well done, good and faithful servant. I told you to hold the rope and you held the rope." It is finishing the course that is a paradox because it affects every one of us, because your race and my race and every believer's race are interchangeably connected in the body of Christ.

We have got to understand that, that we have a personal responsibility to our race but there is a paradox that if we don't run our race, it affects everybody else's race as well.

Which leads to the last point. And it is the last verse here in verse 8. He says there is laid up a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge shall give me at that day and not to me only, but unto all of them that love his appearing.

And the idea here that I want you to understand is, it is not just that we are involved in a race that is a struggle. It is not just that we have a responsibility to ourselves and to

others. But understand the fact that when we finish strong, the Bible speaks of having been given a reward.

Now maybe I am the only carnal person in the room, but I run better if I know there is an award waiting at the end. This holds the idea of why don't you just go out and run as fast as you can as long as you can just because you can. I am not real interested in that. In fact, I am kind of a competitive person and I like that idea of competition. Why? Because every one of you has the same problem. We never like to do just "because." Do you think that football players would play as hard as they could if there was not a Lombardi trophy? If at the end of the season there was no huge Superbowl, there were no ticker tape parades, there was no trophy, and there were no rings? They just said, "Hey, way to go, guys. You beat the other ones." They would be laying it down on the field. Why? Because what is it worth?

And he says here there is laid up a crown of righteousness for me.

I want you to understand first and foremost this. The possibility of a reward. The fact that the Bible speaks five different times in the New Testament to believers in Jesus Christ, 1 Corinthians 9, James chapter 1, 1 Peter chapter 5. It speaks of when we are faithful in our faith there is the opportunity, there is the possibility of receiving a reward. What you need to understand though is this. That this reward that is given out is not given so we can get. It is given so we can give.

And the final thing I want to share with you is this, that this reward isn't just about a possibility, but it is about a certain posture or position that we hopefully one day will hold.

I want you to go Revelation chapter 4. I alluded to it at the very beginning, in Revelation chapter 4 we are taken into the throne room of God. In the midst of all that is happening with all the stuff of the book of Revelation, here we are before the throne. Here we are before the crystal sea and it speaks of beasts and cherubim and angels and even the saints. They are worshipping the Lord. And I want you to notice what it says beginning in verse 9 of Revelation 4.

And when those beasts... and by the way, those beasts were good.

And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.²

² Revelation 4:9-11.

When we understand the posture here. That the possibility of receiving a reward is not so that you can walk down the streets of gold one day and say, “Ha, ha, I have got four. You have only got two.”

In fact, according to this passage, none of us is walking around with any of them, because it is not about what we can collect. It is not about what we can receive. It is about what we can give.

A few weeks ago during the Thanksgiving break we took our annual trek to south Texas, going to see family. And we are down there and the trip is becoming more enjoyable for me, because, I will be honest. I am kind of weird. You all know that. I really like teenagers. I know that makes me strange, but I really like teenagers. And all three of my nieces are now teenagers. That means they are interested in boys and I get to make fun of them. They are conscious about their looks and I get to make fun of them. I just have all kinds of fun, ok?

We are down there in Texas visiting them and I am sure you did this in your family. Maybe you didn't. You ate just a little bit too much. And when you have got three teenage girls who feel like they have eaten too much they think they need to go down to the track and walk it off. Ok? We need to get a little exercise, right? They are conscious about those things. The high school is down the street from where they live and the whole crew went down there. My boys were playing football in the middle and having fun.

My 15-year old twin nieces, I don't know what got into them. And, by the way, I know this is shocking to you. They are taller than me. Shocking. Ok. My 15 year old twin nieces who run cross country decide that they want to race in their words, the “old Uncle Jeff” in a race. They want to run a 100 meter dash. Now they are in running shorts and in running shirts and they have got all the fancy garb. I have got on tennis shoes, blue jeans and a flannel shirt, ok? I mean, understand. When it is 80 degrees in Texas that is cold. You wear flannel, ok?

And I am like, ok, and take off the shirt, and I say, “You all are serious about this.”

And they said, “Yeah.”

So I line up against them and whoever it was said go and before I could look up they are gone. And do you know what I said in my head? This isn't happening. I did everything I could. I ran with an absolute reckless abandonment. Why? Because what I did not want to receive for the next year was their telling me that they whipped me. I didn't want that. I couldn't have that.

I want you to know and it is not bragging if it happened. I beat them four races in a row.

Now here is the deal. The next morning they were fine and I was hurting. I understand that. But I beat them. And let me tell you what the reward is. The reward is every time

they text or call I get to remind them. I didn't get anything. I get to give them a lot of trouble.

Now that is a very simple, carnal illustration that the reward of finishing strong isn't so that we can have a trophy case. It isn't so we can collect a bunch of jewels. It is so that one day when we stand before the Lord, we can give him the honor. We can give him the glory and say, "What you did in saving me, I return and I gave you everything of who I am."