

Finish Well

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[0:00] 2 Timothy chapter 4, we're going to read the first eight verses. 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. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

But you, keep your head in all situations. Endure hardship. Do the work of an evangelist. Discharge all the duties of your ministry.

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

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.

[1:28] Please turn again or keep your Bibles open there to 2 Timothy in chapter 4. Finish well.

Finish well. It's an exhortation that a pit crew could give to their race car driver before the last laps of the race. A manager could give it to his starter that's gone eight strong innings and is going out for the ninth.

A supportive family member could use it to cheer on a runner in a 5K or even a marathon. Or an experienced minister could speak those words to a young man in the ministry.

Like Paul did to Timothy. In this letter, the last one that Paul ever wrote, the last one that he wrote that we have anyway, he exhorts Timothy to finish well.

And he does it by pointing to his own example. He's at the end of his life. That's why this is the last letter that he wrote. He's come to the end, and this dying man's words to his son in the faith are finished well.

[2:45] And words from a dying man should captivate us. They should grab our attention. They should make us sit up and pay attention. They come with an urgency that the words of a man whose death isn't imminent don't have.

I read a book recently. There was a book about preaching, and it was biting. Very critical of much preaching that goes on. But in the introduction, the man said, I wrote this when I thought I was dying of cancer.

I had all these thoughts about preaching, and so I haven't changed any of it. He recovered from his cancer. He said, I haven't changed any of it, because I wanted to come with that force and that weight of a dying man.

And it was biting, and it hurt, and it stung. It made me have to think about my preaching. Well, this is a dying man's words. And Paul didn't recover.

He was in a Roman prison, and not much later, after writing this letter, he did die. But as he comes to the end of his life, he encourages Timothy and us to finish well.

[3:51] And he does it by pointing to his own example. And if you can get to the end of your life, like Paul gets to the end of his, and you're able to say what he says in verses 6-8, then you will have finished well.

And so we want to consider his words. He talks about the present, and then he goes back, and he looks at the past, and then he anticipates the future. And we want to do that for us tonight. We're going to talk about the present right now, and then we're going to consider our past, and then we're going to think about the future, all in an effort to encourage us tonight to finish well.

Having begun the race not to quit. And so we begin in the present. And the thing that we learn right off is that the time of your departure is near too. Now that was true for Paul.

He's about to die. He's sitting in a Roman prison, and he's being poured out as a drink offering. And this brings even more weight to what he said to Timothy already. Remember, he said, Preach the Word.

Be ready. Keep your head. Fulfill your ministry. That's for Timothy. For I, and it's emphasized there in verse 6, For I am already being poured out. Timothy, you've got to do this work of the ministry, because my ministry has come to an end.

[5:00] You need to carry on the torch. That just adds more weight to the charge that he's given. But he can say that he's already being poured out as an offering to God.

Drink offerings or libations were oil or wine that were poured out on the daily sacrifices that were offered in Israel. And Paul draws on that imagery because he had daily poured himself out as a sacrifice, holy and pleasing.

A living sacrifice. Holy and pleasing to God. And soon he would be sacrificed as a martyr for the cause of Christ. Christ. And so he's being poured out and he says, My departure is imminent.

The time has come for my departure. If standing ready at the door, it could come at any time. And the word departure draws on the imagery of a ship. Weighing anchor, unmooring from the dock, and setting sail.

Departing, leaving port, and sailing away. It's a euphemism for death. My death is near. And some people don't like to talk about people passing away or departing.

[6:04] They think we should feel the bite and the sting of it. Death. It's death. We call it what it is. But Paul doesn't have any such hesitation. He's glad to use a euphemism for death. He's glad to call it his departure.

He's already told the Philippians that it's better to depart and be with Christ. To be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord. And so, as Paul is about to pull up anchor and set sail into the sunset of glory, he sets his house in order.

It's one of the reasons he writes this letter. He doesn't want anything left undone when he comes to die. It contains his final instructions to the one he wants to carry on his ministry.

Timothy, preach the word. And what are his dying concerns? If this is a dying man's last words, we should pay attention to what he has to say. His concern is for the church.

And so he's written to Timothy instructing him how to minister in the church, whether things are going well or whether he's facing persecution. The church is important to Paul. And he wants it to continue.

[7:09] And the truth. Primarily, he wants the truth, the sound doctrine, the faith, the gospel to be preserved and pass on. And so you remember his exhortations. Hold fast to the truth.

Train other men for the work of the ministry so that they'll be able to pass it on to others. Avoid and don't tolerate false teaching and godless chatter and stupid arguments.

Because those things undermine the truth and have the potential to tear the church apart. That's his concern. The truth in the church. And so avoid those things that will do damage to them. And don't put up with people who love money and pleasure and self rather than loving God.

And don't soothe people's itching ear just giving them what they want to hear. Preach the word. You see the legacy of the Apostle Paul? Truth and church.

And do you know that we are part of that legacy? We are here in part tonight because Paul was concerned that the church make it until the end and that the truth be preserved to the end.

[8:08] And Grace Fellowship Church is proof that the truth has been proclaimed and passed on from generation to generation. That ministers have been trained. And they've preached that. And they've trained others. And that has come down all the way to us from some 2,000 years ago.

Praise God that Paul on his deathbed wasn't like so many other dying men. Only concerned about himself. He's being poured out as a drink offering for the cause of Christ.

And his concern on his deathbed is the cause of Christ. And so that was Paul's presence at the time. He's being poured out. And his departure was drawing near.

But what about us? Are you right now in the present offering yourself as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God every day? Are you being poured out?

For the cause of his kingdom. In this day, in the present, we must be living for God. Let me ask you a question tonight. If there was severe opposition to Christianity in our day, like was going on in Paul's day from the Roman Empire.

[9:16] They were looking for Christians. They were persecuting them. They were imprisoning them. They were putting them to death. If that was going on in our land, in our day, would anybody come after you?

Would anybody say there's a person who is giving his life in service for the kingdom of God, and if we don't stop him, that kingdom is just going to grow and increase all the more?

Would anybody come after you? Would they imprison you? Would they kill you? Would it be so obvious that you're a follower of Christ that they would make it a priority to silence you and remove you from your sphere of influence so that you could no longer carry on that work?

You don't have to be a super missionary to be poured out for the cause of Christ every day. By living your ordinary life in the place, the realm that God has given to you, with the peace and calm that comes from the power of the Spirit dwelling in you, you have a mighty testimony before a watching world.

You offer valuable service to Christ by the way you live every day. Are you doing it? Is Christ easily on your tongue?

[10:27] Do you often acknowledge God's blessing in everything that comes? Do you deflect praise to Him? Does it show in your countenance? Do you have an inner peace and calm that all mark you out as a follower of Jesus, one who is serving Him?

That's every day. And then when the not-so-ordinary comes, when great difficulty comes, when you lose your job, does that demeanor stay the same? Do people notice your quiet expressions of trust in God and your fervent prayers?

Do they see that you're a servant of Christ? If the government was cracking down, how easy would you be to identify because of how you carry yourself? It's clear that Paul was a servant of Christ.

Clear. And so they went after Him. Would they come after you? And you don't have to die as a martyr. You can say that your life is being poured out as an offering to God by living for Him every day.

Raising your kids in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Honoring God by the way you work, with your work ethic. Working with all your heart is unto the Lord and not unto men.

[11:37] Worshiping God with all of your heart. Praising Him in spirit and in truth. Obeying all of His commandments. Keeping His day holy when others profane it.

Using His name in a way that's pleasing instead of taking it in vain. All of these things and more. Faithful service to Christ. Are you living as a sacrifice for Him every day?

Are you being poured out right now? The way to die well. The way to finish well. Is to live well now. But something else we learned from Paul's observations about his present circumstance.

His departure was near. It was at the door. Your departure is coming too. It's standing at the door. It's ready. Now, none of you tonight, obviously, are in a Roman prison.

Perhaps none of you are anticipating your immediate or very soon death. But that doesn't change the fact that your departure is drawing near. You don't know when it's coming.

[12:40] It could be tonight. It could be years from now. And you may not have the luxury of knowing that it's drawn near. Paul knew it was near. He's going to die. He's in a prison. They're going to execute him.

You might not know that. You might not have a period of time where you get sick and you know that your death is coming. You may not have the luxury of having any dying words that you know are going to be your dying words.

Of having an opportunity to write one last letter. You might not have this chance that Paul had. And that means you must always be ready for your departure.

Don't think of it as something way off in the future that you need to get ready for eventually. Your departure is imminent. It's coming.

And you don't know when. And so Spurgeon says, if our vessel is launching, remember that's the word for departure. You're weighing anchor. You're pulling the ropes and you're setting to sail. If our vessel is launching, let us see that she is seaworthy.

[13:40] Let's always make sure that the boat is ready to sail. If you had to untie from the dock and sail away tonight, would you be ready? First of all, is your soul ready?

When your ship sets sail, when you die, there's only two possible destinations. Only two places you can go. It's not like going to a travel agent and saying, I want to go on a cruise and he'll give you about a hundred different places you can go on a cruise.

That's not where this boat's going. One of two places. It will head for an eternity of glory, which is what Paul is anticipating because he's finished well, or to an eternity of suffering and punishment. And the only way that... There's no in-between. There's no purgatory. There's no annihilation. There's no just ceasing to exist. There's one destination or the other. And the only way to be ready for that is by trusting in Christ. First, he came and lived so that you might have life.

[14 : 49] He died so that you wouldn't have to face that eternal suffering and death. And that's what you deserve. It's what I deserve. We all deserve the one destination. We all deserve judgment. We all deserve punishment.

But you can be ready for that day and you can avoid that if you would but trust in Christ. If you're found in Him on that day. If you are trusting in Him. If He is your hope. Then your boat's going to heaven.

You know the Gospel. You know the truth. A free, a gracious offer from our God. That you can be saved. Why would you reject it? If your boat was on a river and you came to a fork in the river and there was a sign there and it said, Niagara Falls this way.

And some beautiful national park this way. Which way would you steer your boat? Well, only a fool would steer it towards Niagara Falls.

And if you've ever been to Niagara Falls, you know why. The massive force of all of the water going over those falls. There's no way you would survive it in your little boat.

[15 : 53] You would be crushed. It would be certain death if you said, I'm going to go to Niagara Falls on this river. Nobody in their right mind would do that. You'd go to the beautiful national park or whatever is down this branch of the river.

And yet, as you sit here tonight, the two options are held before you. Death or life. Punishment or glory.

And I fear that many will continue down the path of death instead of running and trusting in Christ and His righteousness. Don't be that foolish. I know that you feel indestructible.

And that you are young. Some of you. And that you have your whole life stretching out before you. And that there is time before your departure comes.

And that you are strong. And that you have many good years ahead of you. I know that you think that. But you don't know that. You have no promise of it.

[16 : 52] You have no guarantee. No man knows the time of his death or the day of Christ's return. And that means you have to be ready. And you have to be ready now.

Your departure is coming. Will your soul be ready? If you know your soul is ready, there are other things that need to be done to prepare for your departure.

Paul sets his house in order. And I want you to imagine with me for a moment something rather morbid and pleasant. Imagine with me that you don't get to walk out of these doors tonight. That you don't even get out of your seat tonight.

You die where you are. If that's the case, if you were to die right at this moment, what regrets would you have? What would you wish you had done differently today?

Let alone the rest of your life. What would you change about what you've said today? Would you regret the biting, angry words that you spoke to a friend, to a wife, to a husband, to your children?

[17 : 59] Would you regret the argument and the fight that is unresolved with someone that's close to you? You've been letting it simmer because it sort of feels good sometimes just to stew and to carry a grudge a little bit.

There's enough sin in us still that just somehow wickedly, sinfully feels good to us. Would you regret that? Were you to die tonight? Is your house in order?

What about your family? Would you be ready to leave your family behind tonight? Are you on good terms with them? I hope that we're not carrying grudges, continuing on bad terms with family and friends.

If they were to depart or you were to depart before you could make it right, your last interaction, one of cruelty and coldness. Would you have done things differently if you had known your departure was tonight?

Make amends with those with whom you have problems. It does us no good to go around that way. Spurgeon has some excellent words here. He says, Does Christ love them?

[19:05] The person that you're so upset with. Does Christ love them? And shall not we? He covers their offenses. Why then should we disclose them or publish them abroad?

If any of you have any grievances with one another, if there is any bickering or jealousy between you, I should like you to make it up tonight because the time of your departure is at hand. I would like for you to do the same.

Now, Spurgeon words. But if you're carrying that kind of garbage around, not ready to go and depart, make it up tonight. Don't wait. You don't know that there will be another chance.

What else would you do differently? So often we cling to temporary prosperity and earthly pleasure as though we're going to be here forever.

And so we accumulate for us wealth and things and all sorts of things. If you died tonight, what good is all of that? Well, maybe it would do your family some good if you've prepared and written a will as part of being ready to die.

[20:09] It's a kind thing to do for the rest of your family. But what good is all your accumulated treasure going to do in the long run? I hope that instead you're living for something greater that you have like Paul did a faithful witness and testimony to Christ, your King.

Don't depart this world regretting that you never spoke to this person or to that person about Christ. You meant to, but you just assumed that you would have another chance to do it. You don't know that. Don't die with that regret.

Wishing that you had. What about those of you old enough to have children or grandchildren? Don't die wishing that you had done a better job of passing the truth on to the next generation.

Of course, we always would like to do better than we've done, but don't die having failed to do it at all. Having made the best effort to share the Gospel with them as Timothy's mother and grandmother did with him.

They had passed it on. They could die knowing that they had a child that believed that they had faithfully shepherded and given him the Word. Make sure you've passed the truth on to the next generation.

[21:18] That could be said for individuals. It could be said for the church. Listen to John Stott. He says, the torch of the Gospel is handed down by each generation to the next. As leaders of the former generation die, it is all the more urgent for those of the next generation to step forward bravely to take their place.

We cannot rest forever on the leadership of the preceding generation. The day comes when we must step into their shoes and ourselves take the lead. Now, it's not comfortable to think about or to talk about, but churches should think about it and they should talk about it.

Who is going to lead this church 20 years from now? Are we going to regret that we failed to groom and train men for the ministry?

Will any of you young men regret that you never thought about going into the ministry? Are there any young men here who would step into the shoes of Pastor Bob who is in his 70s?

Or Pastor John who is in his 50s? Or me? And I'm in my 30s. Is there anyone who would fill our shoes when we depart this world?

[22:32] You know, I could die first. We don't know. Is there anybody who would continue spreading the Gospel in France when our brother David Vaughn leaves the scene?

Is there going to be anybody for us to write a letter to and to say, we've finished the race. Now you carry it on. You finished well. We need to think about that. We need to plan for that.

We don't want to die with that regret. Have we and are we preparing the next generation to carry on?

Are you doing it in your homes? Are we doing it as a church? Any young men here tonight that would think about taking up the Gospel banner, preaching for Christ? And one other observation about our imminent departure.

Let us not despise it or dread it. I know that death is unnatural, that it's painful, but it does, for those in Christ, bring us home to Christ.

[23:35] And Christ Himself underwent death. Spurgeon, in a sermon on this verse, makes it, I think, a fascinating observation that he would rather die than be alive when Jesus comes again.

Everybody wants to be alive when Jesus comes back. They want to meet Him in the air. And Spurgeon says that he would rather die. Well, Spurgeon got his wish. He's dead. And Jesus hasn't come back yet. So he got his wish.

But he would rather die than be alive when Christ comes back. And he said that because he wanted to be conformed to Christ in every way, including suffering death like His Lord did.

And I'm not saying that you have to have the same desire, but we don't need to dread our death if we are in Christ. We seek to use our time while we're here well and to be useful.

And we make sure that when our departure comes that we're ready for it. And if we're ready and we can say that we've finished well, then we can look forward to that departure and the reward that is waiting for us on the other side when our ship sets sail.

[24 : 42] You can look forward to your departure. The reality of the present. We're going to move on and talk about the past. But the reality of the present should be that we are living sacrifices for Christ and that we are ready to depart and be with Him.

Can you say that tonight? Are you living for Him and ready to depart and be with Him? Well, secondly, let's talk about the past like Paul does in v. 7. What does your past look like?

Paul can say, I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. It might look like he's bragging as he looks back over his life. I don't think he is. He's simply showing Timothy and all of us who would seek to heed his exhortation that he's not calling us to something impossible or to something that he himself didn't do.

He's telling us to finish well and he did it. He set that example and what he did can't be done in his own strength or our strength. It's by the grace and power of God.

The same grace and power of God that enables Paul to have lived in such a way that he can say what he says in v. 7. That grace and power is available to you. So I want you to take a look back tonight.

[25 : 50] Wherever you are in your life, early on in your life, in the middle of your life, towards the end of your life, have a look back at the past. And if this was the end, could you say that you have fought the good fight, that you've finished the race and you've kept the faith?

Now it's sort of hard for that middle one. Finish the race. We're in the middle of the race. I understand that. But how have you run the race so far? We start with fighting the fight for Paul. It can be war or athletic imagery.

I think war is in view here. Remember back in chapter 2 we had the picture of the soldier and the athlete and the farmer. Well, here's the soldier again. He's fought the good fight.

He's been loyal to his master, focused on his task. And it's a good fight that he's fought. Not a wasted one, a foolish one, one of his own making, but he fought for a noble and worthy cause.

And back in his first letter to Timothy, he said, fight the good fight of faith. And now he says he has fought that fight. And in the ministry in particular and in Christian life in general, those things are war.

[26 : 53] And we have to fight as Paul did. And he can say, you can look back and he say, he's finished the course and here's our athlete again. He's competed by the rules. He hasn't strayed from the course. He hasn't cut off a corner.

He didn't run through the infield and skip part of the track or miss one of the flags in the cross country race. He stayed on the path and he has finished it. And that's what he wanted to do.

He had communicated that very desire to the church in Ephesus when he gave his parting words to the elders at Ephesus. And that's where Timothy is now. In Acts 20.

You know what he said? Acts 20-24. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me the task of testifying to the Gospel of God's grace.

God said, Paul, He got him on the road to Damascus. He said, Paul, you're going to be a servant for me to take my Gospel to the Gentiles. This is the race I have laid out before you and I want you to run it.

[27 : 54] And Paul is able to get to the end of his life and say that he did. He finished it. His honest assessment is that by the grace of God, he made it to the finish line, not turning aside right or left, pursuing his own agenda.

He stayed the course and proclaimed the Gospel. And all along the way, he kept the faith. He's been exhorting Timothy to do that very thing, to hold on to the truth, the sound doctrine, and the faith once for all delivered to the saints, as Jude calls it.

And Paul can say that he's done that. God entrusted the Gospel to Paul. He gave it to him. He said, you be faithful with this message. And Paul held on to that message. He didn't twist it. He didn't

pervert it.

He didn't tell people what their itching ears wanted to hear. He didn't soften the blow of the Gospel to avoid persecution and people thinking you were strange. He proclaimed it faithfully. He kept it. He guarded it. He kept the faith. And we don't have time, but we could study the life of the Apostle Paul tonight. And we could see how he indeed accomplished these things.

[28:55] And wasn't the ministry a battle for him? Wasn't he constantly facing opposition from the Jews on this side and from the Roman government on this side and then from the very churches that he founded and was laboring for here right in front of him?

Constantly battling in the ministry. And this race he ran, it wasn't just a short sprint, it was a marathon. But he ran it at a sprinter's pace. He goes from city to city and country to country. Shipwrecks and traveling and all of this. Tirelessly laboring for the Gospel. He ran the race. Proclaiming that message. Holding the faith. Not watering down the message.

Focusing on completing that course of proclaiming the Gospel to the Gentiles that God had given him. The fights he fought. The race he finished. The faith he kept.

You read the book of Acts, you'll find an extended commentary on 1 Timothy 4-7. 2 Timothy 4-7. But what about you?

[29:56] Take a look back over your life tonight. Again, if you were to depart tonight, could you take verse 7 on your lips? Not in your own strength.

I know, in our own strength, we can't even begin to think about being able to say this. But by the grace of God, could you say that you've fought the good fight? Some people go through life hiding in the shadows.

Avoiding the conflict. They don't take a stand for Christ because they don't want the persecution that results. They don't want that fight. They blend in with the world so that no one will notice that they're different.

So that there's no conflict. They isolate themselves from the world so that they're never seen at all. That's not fighting the good fight. It's not to say that you should be going out and picking fights and being obnoxious and taking a megaphone and shouting in people's faces and hitting them over the head with your Bible.

That's not the fight that he's talking about. If you think that's the gospel fight, you're fighting the wrong fight. That isn't a good fight. It's a bad one. And what we are talking about is living your life in such a way that they may see your good works.

[30:59] And having Christ on your tongue and speaking a word for Him. Taking a stand for Him. And knowing that when you do that, it will bring trouble. When you take a stand that you won't treat the Sabbath like any other day, the people on your team are going to look at you like you're a stranger.

Your family's going to think that you're odd. The people where you work are going to tell you how foolish you are to be bound by such silly commands. And when they call you out on it, you can humbly and boldly tell them why you love the Lord's Day and why it's a privilege to keep it and to lay aside your worldly work and recreations and focus on worshiping God.

And you can fight that good fight. It could come for other reasons. You refuse to go to that movie with your friends. You won't let your kids play that video game.

You share the Gospel of Christ with someone and they mock you. All sorts of things are going to bring the fight to your doorstep. Can you say that you've fought it? That you haven't shirked your responsibility?

That you haven't avoided it because you were afraid? What about the path that God has laid before you? For Paul, it was one of ministry. Faithful service.

[32:09] And he could say he'd finished it well. How have you run the race that God has called you to? It's not ministry for everyone. He's called some of you here to be mothers. And some of you mothers, your kids are grown and they're out of the house.

And many of your mothering responsibilities have passed. Can you look back by God's grace and say that you've run that race well? Or if your kids are still at home, are you persevering in the race? By God's grace. God's called you, you married men, to be faithful husbands. Looking back, how are you running that race? How are you doing so far? Loving your wife.

As Christ loved the church. Having eyes only for her. Some are called to ministry. And we have to be able to look back over the course of that ministry and say that we have finished well.

Some are here are called to be students. You know we have eight graduating high school seniors this year in our church? Eight. That's a lot. Can you seniors or the rest of you students look back over your time in high school and elementary school and say that you have run that race well? [33 : 24] That's what God has called you to do. And that's your place right now for you to be poured out as a sacrifice for Christ. Your place to live for him. Your place to honor him. Are you doing that for his glory?

Are you finishing well? Have you worked hard and to the best of your ability? That's God's calling for you. Finish that race. Have you done it for God's glory and not for your own? That's part of the running the race.

Is doing it with an eye to him. And then are you firmly holding to the truth? Now it's one thing just to get through life. It's another thing to do it while clinging to the truth and not letting go.

And I don't pretend to stand up here tonight and tell you that this is easy. We're called to do three things at once here. It would be hard enough just to run a marathon. I can't really fathom running 26.2 miles.

But you imagine doing it in full combat gear with people shooting at you and running after you and trying to stop you and tackling you and coming at you with knives and machetes.

[34 : 25] It's because you're fighting a war and you're running the race at the same time but at the same time you've got the faith. You've got this truth that's been entrusted to you and you have to protect that.

And if you drop it and you lose it along the way then you've lost your way. And so you've got these three things going on. It's not easy. You try to do it in your strength and you'll fail but you've got to fight the fight and run the race and you've got to hold on to the truth while you're doing that and not let it go.

If you've survived high school with your faith intact praise God and pray that it will give you the grace to do it in college. It's going to get harder not easier.

And then as you go out into the world working it's going to get harder to hold on to the truth. Parents you have to hold on to the faith even when your children push the limits of your ability to believe the promises of God's Word.

Has that ever happened to you? Something happens with your children. They do something and it causes you to doubt what God says in His Word. It's at moments like that that you have to cling to the faith the truth the gospel what God has given us in His Word and not let go.

[35 : 44] There will be times when what you see with your eyes finds no place in the grid of your theology your faith your belief. That's not the time to let go of the faith and look for a new model something else that makes sense.

That's the time to pray that God will give you grace to see the trial before you through His eyes from His perspective. Keep the faith hold on to it. Don't let it go.

If you want to finish well you need to run well all along the way. The way to die well is to have lived well. When you look back over your life to this point what do you see?

But before we move on to consider the future tonight maybe you look back at your life and you see that there's no way that you can say you've even made an effort to fight the good fight to finish the race or to keep the faith.

Maybe that's true for someone here tonight. And if it is true it's never too late to start. Right where you sit in your chair tonight you can make a course correction.

[36 : 53] And instead of pursuing your own pleasure you can commit to the Lord by His grace and in His power to turning to Christ forsaking your worldly ways setting your face towards heaven and seeking to live for Him from now on.

You've lived for yourself to this point. You can change by the grace of God you can beg Him for mercy and He can enable you from this point to fight well to run well to hold on to the faith or if you've made a profession of faith but you haven't lived up to that high calling you need to re-evaluate and commit to living for Christ tonight.

You know what? Paul got a late start too. He spent a lot of his life not fighting the good fight. He was fighting a bad fight. He was persecuting the church.

He wasn't running the race at all. He wasn't keeping the faith. And he got started as a man later in life.

You can too. It doesn't matter where you are in life. If you're a child tonight the youngest one of you can turn to Christ and begin to fight that fight and run that race tonight. If you're old and you've never done it you can turn tonight.

[38:04] If you're middle-aged and set in your ways and you don't think anything could ever change you can beg God and He can change your path tonight. Run to Christ for forgiveness for your sins. Grace to live for and serve Him.

And when you seek Him you will find Him. And maybe there are some older folks here tonight who feel as though your life has little meaning now.

Not much you can do. People don't pay attention to you anymore. You don't feel as though there's a valuable contribution you can make to society or the church. I want you to look over the life that God has given you and the blessings that He's poured out on you.

And if by His grace you've run the race not perfectly. Paul couldn't say that he had run it perfectly. But if by His grace you've run the race and fought the fight then praise God for it.

You have done great good in this world. And you are continuing to by finishing well. What an example you are for the younger or the middle-aged people in our congregation.

[39:14] You're doing them good. They can look at you and say she's run the race well. He has fought the good fight and I hope and pray that I'll be able when I get to that point in my life if the Lord should extend it that long that I'll be able to look back like He is.

Like she is. And to say that I've finished well. So you press on until your ship departs for glory and God takes you safely home. Well that's a bit about the past.

Now thirdly finally tonight what will your future hold? Talked about the present. A little about the past and now your future. And that's what Paul talks about in verse 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.

What's your future hold? If you have kept the faith finished the race there will be a reward. Paul tells the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 9:24 and 25 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run but only one gets the prize?

[40:23] 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 but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

You know what the difference is in the races in the Olympics and in this race of the Christian life? It's not just the winner that gets the prize. It's everybody that finishes the race.

If you make it to the end you'll get the crown of righteousness that Paul talks about here. If you finish well by His grace it will be rewarded to you in that day.

It's the crown of glory Peter calls it. The crown of life John calls it. In James 2 James 1 in verse 12 we read blessed is the man who perseveres. You hear that language of finishing well sticking with it to the end not quitting partway there.

Him who perseveres under trial because when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him we must persevere finish the course and Paul is convinced that that crown of righteousness will be his.

[41:29] It will be awarded to me on that day. It's stored up for him waiting for the second coming of Christ. Christ has gone back to heaven and he's there and he's preparing a place for his people to go but he also has stored up there a whole bunch of crowns of righteousness and when he comes again he's going to reward them to his people on that day.

He's going to on that day he's going to come he's going to judge the living and the dead he's the righteous judge and he's going to send the wicked those who aren't righteous to eternal punishment but he's going to crown the righteous with that glorious crown and who better to evaluate who should receive a crown of righteousness than the righteous judge.

And so that day's coming and Paul's confident that when it comes he'll receive that crown of righteousness. The crown of righteousness is simply the crown given to those who are righteous. And since there's no one righteous not even one it's only for those who are in Christ. Those who are clothed in his righteousness who have trusted in him.

And isn't that what Paul is gloried in all along? He's boasted in his weakness and gloried in the strength of Christ. Delighted in his righteousness. 1 Corinthians 1:30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus who has become for us wisdom from God that is our righteousness holiness and

redemption.

[42:58] If you're trusting in Christ his righteousness is yours and you will receive that crown on that day. But you know what? One of the college students was telling me they looked at Hebrews 12 last night and it says that without holiness no one will see the Lord.

Or we could say that without righteousness no one will see the Lord. And so if you have trusted in Christ and you claim to be clothed in his righteousness you know what you'll be doing? You'll be living a life of righteousness.

You'll be living a life of holiness. You will have actual good deeds to show for yourself in the day of judgment by God's grace. And so that crown of righteousness yes it's for only those who are righteous in Christ but if you're righteous in Christ then you will have righteousness to show for it. But you'll receive that crown that reward in that day. Well crowns of righteousness aren't just for apostles like Paul. I love what he says at the end of verse 8.

The righteous judge is going to award it to me on that day. And not only to me. Not just for me the great apostle Paul but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

[44:08] To everyone who has loved his appearing. He bookends this section by the appearing of Christ. He talks about it back in verse 1 and he talks about it again here.

And we are to live our lives with a view to Christ coming again. And we are to long for that coming. We are to love it. We are to eagerly anticipate it. We are to look forward to it.

We can love something that we can't see. We can't see his appearing because he hasn't appeared yet but we can still love him and we can look forward to and long for that day. And the crown of righteousness is for you, child of God.

You who are looking forward to his coming. The reward of glory is for all who finish that race well. Not in your strength but by the power of the almighty God.

If there's a glorious crown waiting for us shouldn't that decrease our attachment to this world? If there's something far better in our future shouldn't we not be so consumed with what this world has to offer?

[45:10] Don't misunderstand. This is the world where God has placed us. We are to live here. We are to work here. We are to enjoy life here. And we are to enjoy God here. But if you think this world is your home you're mistaken.

This world is not my home. I'm just a passing through. Our home is in glory. That's where we're headed. There's something far better coming than what we have here. And so may God give us grace to fix our affections on the unseen eternal inheritance that waits for us in glory.

Now some people will say well there's a crown coming but I don't see any evidence of that now. I'm going to live however I want and maybe when I come to die I'll get serious about it. If you students were given an assignment and before your teacher left the room she said I'm coming back in a few minutes I'm not going to tell you how long and whoever I find working when I get back and who shows signs of having worked the whole time that assignment is either finished or it's almost done. It's clear that you've been working that whole time. Then I'm going to reward you with a full tuition scholarship to the college of your choice. What would you do if you were a student? And you knew that was in your future.

That was being held before you as a reward. Would you ever do that? Would you ever offer that? We've got a teacher in the front room. Probably not. But what would you do if a teacher offered you that?

[46:38] I hope. I hope that you would work. I hope that you would put your head down at your desk and you would work and work and work knowing that when she returned she better find you working.

Or he better find you working. so that you could receive the reward. Sadly, many professing Christians live their lives the way that many students behave when the teacher is out of the classroom.

They goof off. They don't obey. They do what they want rather than what God wants. They live in a way that's pleasing to themselves and not in a way that's pleasing to Him.

And this is not the life that is pleasing to God. This is not the way to run the race and receive a crown at the end. This is not the way. The way to finish well isn't to have somebody standing on guard looking out the window of the door to see when the teacher's coming and say, the teacher's coming everybody!

Get back to work! That's not how you finish well. It's to wait until some prophet comes along and says, oh, Jesus is coming back on May 11, 2009.

[47:50] That's tomorrow. So all of a sudden, now we get ready. The way to finish well is to work hard all along the way. To not quit by God's grace. And that's what Jesus said, isn't it?

The righteous judge. What did He teach us in Matthew 24? Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom the Master has put in charge of the servants in His household to give them their food at the proper time?

It will be good for that servant whose Master finds Him doing so when He returns. I tell you the truth, He will put him in charge of all His possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, my Master is staying away a long time.

And He then begins to beat His fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The Master of that servant will come on a day when He does not expect Him. And at an hour that He is not aware of, He will cut him to pieces and will assign him a place with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

You know what? Jesus calls you if you say, I'm just going to do whatever I want until I think my death is coming near, until I think Christ is coming back. He calls you a hypocrite. And He says that people who live however they want to live instead of living for Christ are going to be assigned a place with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

[49:10] They'll be sent to the... when the righteous judge comes, he's not going to say, well done, good and faithful servant. He's going to say, depart from me. I never knew you. We're to live our life in view of the appearing of Christ.

It's coming. Either that will come first or your death will come first. Both possibilities are held out in this passage before us. It doesn't matter. You have to be ready.

Whichever one comes first. The way to be ready is to be trusting in Christ and living for Him.

Fighting the good fight. Finishing the race.

Keeping the faith. Are you longing for Christ appearing and living in light of it? Well, do you feel your inadequacy tonight?

I do. I can't fight the fight and run the race and keep the faith and my own strength. I can't do it. But it's vital.

[50:11] We must do it. We have to do it to finish well. But we can't. And so, where do we turn?

Well, we turn where we always turn. To Christ, who is our provision, who is our strength, who is our righteousness.

We look to our faithful God in prayer and in complete dependence. We get up each morning and we say, God, give me strength today to fight and to run and to hold on. Help me.

Because I can't do it. And we look and we encourage our hearts by seeing others who have gone before us that have done. We look at the life of the Apostle Paul and we find, he did it. And we look at Timothy and find that he finished well too.

And we look at people right here in our own congregation and we say, thank the Lord for that man and that woman that had finished well. God, give me grace to finish that way. We make use of the means of grace. We're in His Word.

We pray. We fellowship with other believers and we hear about their struggles. And their fight along the way. And their efforts to run the race. And we pray for them and they pray for us. And we make use of those means that God has given to walk closely with Him until the time comes for us to weigh anchor and untie from the dock and set sail for heaven.

[51:21] If you're fighting the fight, finishing the race, and keeping the faith, then you can look forward to your departure regardless of when it comes. The crown of righteousness will be yours.

And so may God give us the grace and strength to live well, to die well, and to finish well. God help us. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we pray that You would give us grace to finish well. We pray that we might be able, if we have the opportunity to look back on our life knowing that our death is coming soon, help us to be able to look back and say that we fought the good fight, that we've finished the race, and that we've kept the faith.

We cannot do it. But You can do it in us. And so we pray that You would give us the help and strength that is necessary to finish the race well. And we pray that You would set some on that course, on that race, for the first time tonight.

We pray that You would open their eyes and show them that their departure is coming and that they're headed for the wrong destination. Turn them and set them on the course that leads to life. Do this great work.

[52 : 30] Encourage our hearts. Make us to finish well, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.