

FINISHING WELL
Philippians 2:12-16

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

Last Thursday morning, Malcom Feistel, missionary to Taiwan, entered into his Lord's presence. Malcom had suffered for the past year with colon cancer. We have been praying for Malcom and his family for the past several months as his physical condition slowly deteriorated. Just a couple of weeks ago, when he was sent home under hospice care, Malcom encouraged a man for whom he had been praying for some time to come to his home to visit him. When he arrived, Malcom was able to lead him to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The following is an excerpt from an up-date from his wife, Carol.

Since coming home from the hospital last Thursday, Malcom has continued to weaken and decline in health. He did, however, summon up the determination to attend church on Sunday so that he might witness the baptism of our friend Joe. Each day he grows weaker in body, but stronger in spirit. He doesn't complain, but shows concern for others and especially for me. I am becoming aware of the "dying grace" that others have spoken of which I see the Lord giving not only to Malcom, but also to me and our children. In this time of our lives, God's one-size-fits-all grace is much needed.

Malcom Feistel finished his race well. He had served as a missionary in Taiwan for over 25 years and had been able

to win hundreds of people to Christ. While he was only 53 years old when he died, Malcom had remained faithful to his Lord and Savior throughout his relatively short life. Yes, he finished well.

As we noted last week, the Scripture often uses different analogies to illustrate the Christian life. The analogy of a race is extremely enlightening whether you have ever run in a race or not. However, it is important to understand that the Christian life cannot be compared to a sprint (short distance race). These may involve a great deal of preparation and skill but only last for a few seconds. The Christian life is more like a marathon - that grueling 26 + mile event.

Many a person has started the race well but then soon tired and dropped out. A true picture of the way in which many are running the race would be like this. Most are either walking around the track or even sitting or lying down on the track. In fact, those who continue to run must, in many cases, hurdle over idle participants.

Jim Ryun grew up in Wichita, Kansas achieving national acclaim as a High School track and field star. Jim set the male High School Mile Record at 3:55.3 in 1963 which stills stands today. He also participated in the 1964, 1968, and 1972 Olympic games, winning a silver medal in the 1500 meter run in 1968 and held the World Record in the mile, 1500 meters, and 880 yards.

Jim gives the following testimony: I was America's hope for a gold medal in the 1500-meter race at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany. That hope died when I fell just 500 meters short of the finish in my qualifying race. Though the video proved I had been fouled, the Olympic Committee refused to reinstate me.

I had focused all my training and energy for a full year on that one event. Now it had been stolen from me. The old Jim Ryun wanted to express his anger to each committee member with a swift kick of his size 12 1/2 track shoe. But, how was the new Christian Jim Ryun going to handle the situation?

For 10 years, running had been my god. Joining my high school track team in 1962, I ran the mile in 5:38. The following spring, I ran a 4:07 mile. In 1964, I became the world's first high schooler to run the mile in under four minutes and qualified to compete in the Tokyo Olympics. I owed it all (I thought) to my god - running. I gave my god the best of everything. . . my time, my energy, my love.

In July 1966, I set my first world's record at 3:51.3. I was the fastest miler alive!

In the midst of the glory, I became aware of a gnawing emptiness in my heart. "If I'm so successful," I reasoned, "Why am I so dissatisfied?" Regardless of what I achieved, I was always pressed to get better..... You never reach the finish line.

In 1967, I set another record for the mile at 3:51.1. That record stood unbroken for eight years. I competed in the 1968 Olympics and took home the silver medal in the 1500-meter race. But, the emptiness remained.

Jim married his wife Anne in 1969 and shortly afterward retired from running. However, in 1971, Jim and Anne decided that he should return to competition. It was just before the 1972 Olympics that friends witnessed to Jim and Anne. At that time they both received Christ as their Lord and Savior. Jim states: "On May 18, 1972, we knelt with friends to receive the Lord into our lives... As we prayed, the empty place in my heart, never filled by the successes of running, was filled with an overwhelming peace."

A short time later, at the most important athletic event in the world, I was to find out how the new Christian Jim Ryun would handle the major crises of his running career. "Lord," I complained, "these Olympic officials know I was fouled. They won't reinstate me because they've never done such a thing before."

It would be nice to say the Lord performed a miracle and got me back in the race. Instead, He decided on a greater miracle.

For years I struggled with hurt and bitterness over that

event. One night, I knelt and said, "Lord, forgive me for the bitterness in my heart." I knew the Lord had forgiven me, but I still felt unable to forgive those who had wronged me.

I continued in prayer, pursuing complete forgiveness. Then one day, I became aware of an amazing thing: I was no longer bitter. God allowed me to be disqualified from the world's most prestigious athletic competition to show me how to be a real winner.

Have you found that success has failed to fill the emptiness in your heart? Running with Jesus will fill that void and give you the peace and joy you long for.

If you are not a Christian, get in the race, because you have to enter before you can hope to win. If you are a Christian, run with endurance; don't give up.

A race is not a thing of passive luxury, but is demanding, sometime grueling and agonizing, and requires our utmost in self-discipline, determination, and perseverance.

Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and trust in Mount Samaria... Amos 6:1

How can we "finish well"?

1. ENDURANCE

...work out your own salvation ...

Notice carefully the wording here. We are being challenged to "work out" our salvation, not to "work for our salvation. The phrase *work out* conveys the idea of continuing to work to completion. It is because of God's work within us that makes this possible.

...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Hebrews 12:1b

Endurance is steady determination to keep going. It means continuing even when everything in you wants to slow down or give up. There have always been "short-distance" Christians, but the Lord wants those who will "make the distance." There will be obstacles and there will be weariness

and exhaustion, but we must endure if we are to win.

Many of the Hebrew Christians to whom this verse was originally written had started well. They had seen signs and wonders and were thrilled with their new lives. But as the new began to wear off and problems began to arise, they began to lose their enthusiasm and their confidence.

It is not unusual for someone to be got up into something on a short-term basis. We probably all have experienced this. Whether it was a sport we pursued for a while, or a musical instrument, even a job. However, those who truly master those things don't do so in just a day or two or even a few weeks. The winners, the skilled musicians, the successful business men - these have "stayed with" their desires when the newness wore off.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. 1 Corinthians 9:24

There is a great difference in the Christian life and athletic race. First, we are not to compete against other Christians, trying to outdo each other in righteousness, recognitions, or accomplishments. Ours is not a race of works but a race of faith. Yet we are not to compete with other believers even in faith. We compete by faith not with each other. Our completion is against Satan, his world system and our own sinfulness. Secondly, our strength is not in ourselves, but in the Holy Spirit.

There is only one way for the Christian to endure - by faith. We sin and fail when we do not trust. Our most basic protection against Satan's temptations is the shield of faith.

Above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. Ephesians 6:16

Endurance comes as we trust in God. As long as we are trusting God and doing what He wants us to do, Satan and sin have no power over us. When we run in the power of God's Spirit, we run successfully.

2. COMMITMENT

Do all things without complaining and disputing.

It is a natural human trait to complain, and there will probably always be something to complain about. However, a complaining spirit will not experience much joy and will definitely serve as a damper to the joy of others around. If we are to finish well, we must make the commitment to finish in spite of hardships, hurdles, or anything else that may hinder us. Listen to Paul's attitude:

...for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Philippians 4:11-13

Too many of us are ready to run so long as the sun is shining and everything is going our way. If we are going to finish well, we must commit ourselves to the race. It has been said that the measure of a man or woman is what it takes to make him or her quit. What does it take to make you quit?

The truth is that God is bigger than anything we can possibly face. Paul's commitment was not because he was convinced he could overcome any obstacle, but that God was able to give him the needed strength.

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us Ephesians 3:20

No runner who runs a race of any distance at all would ever finish if he had not first made a commitment to finish. I guarantee you anyone who runs a distance race would find plenty of excuses to stop before he or she finished.

3. FOCUS

...holding fast the word of life...

Even the most disciplined runner will still struggle

unless he has a goal upon which to focus. The writer of Hebrews makes this statement:

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2

If we focus on ourselves, we will fail. If we focus on what others think, we will fail. If our focus is truly on Jesus Christ, we will see everything else in its right perspective.

When Jesus went to the cross, He endured all that it demanded. He despised the shame and accepted it willingly, for the sake of His Father's reward and the joy that anticipation of this reward brought. As we run the race of the Christian life, we can run in the joyful anticipation of that same reward - the crown of righteousness, which one day we can cast at His feet as evidence of our eternal love for Him.

When we get weary in the race, when our faith runs out and we think God has turned His back, when it seems we will never get out of the mess we are in and we are sure our faith cannot hold on any longer, we need to be reminded...

For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. Hebrews 12:3

We can look forward to that day when, if we have been faithful, He will say...

Well done, good and faithful servant.

Then it will be worth it all!

Instead of a the pine wreath that the runners of the ancient games received, we can look forward to a crown that will last forever, an incorruptible crown. Heaven is not the reward for eternal life is a free gift of God. It can never be earned. A crown is a reward for faithfulness and obedience.

Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. 2 Timothy 4:8

The rewards are not to enhance our prestige in heaven, but to enable us to bring glory to our Savior. That will be our supreme desire.

The twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created." Revelation 4:10-11

What on earth are you doing for heaven's sake?

About this Sermon: The above is a sermon outline prepared by Pastor Michael Switzer and was preached for the family of believers at Cornerstone Baptist Church, Middletown NY. It is published here for instructional purposes. Although it is copyrighted to protect from abuse or misquotation, it may be quoted in-part or linked freely from other websites. When using more than 33% of the text or if using in any printed format, please contact us for permission. All Bible references from the New King James Version (NKJV). Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ©2006 Cornerstone Baptist Church