



## The Finish Line

2 Timothy 4:1-8  
October 13, 2019



*Please read 2 Timothy 4:1-8 before going any further in this transcript.*

Today is week #5 or our 5 for 5 challenge. Congratulations to those of us who made it to all 5 Sundays! I know it's not easy to do in our busy lives. Keeping Sunday morning attendance on our plate is one of the best ways that we can build up our spiritual muscles. Our focus this morning is on "The Finish Line." As we think about The Finish Line, let me give a quick report on the Blue Ox marathon from this weekend. About 20 people from Efree participated in one way or another. All three of us pastors ran the 10k (Albin, Eric, and me). I need to tell you it was snowing and blowing like crazy. At times, Pastor Eric's eyeglasses were so covered in snow he literally couldn't see where he was going. The weather added to the challenge and was a little miserable at times, but we all made it! Congratulations to Pastor Albin, he had the best running time, by far, out of us three pastors.



Today we're going to talk about a different kind of Finish Line: The Finish Line of the Christian Life. The Finish Line when we reach the end of our days in this world and begin our eternity with God in heaven. Can you picture it: The Finish Line of your Christian Life in this world? What does "The Finish Line of the Christian Life" look like to you? For some of us, we may envision...

...our final rest from all of this running. All the labor and striving and struggle are finally over.

...our final deliverance from this fallen world. We will finally be rid of our sinful nature. We will no longer have to contend with this fallen, broken, messed up world system. Our enemy, the devil, will be finally and fully defeated with no more influence in our lives or the lives of those around us.

...the final end of death and suffering and mourning. There will be no more tears and pain and loss caused by the temporary nature of life in this world.

...being reunited with our Christian family/friends who've preceded us in going to heaven.<sup>1</sup>

...our final Heavenly reward. Breaking through the ribbon and receiving the prize of our eternal salvation!

Perhaps you envision one of the things I've mentioned. Or, maybe you envision something else. There is a Finish Line to this life and that makes all the difference in terms of HOW we run the race and WHY we need to be sure that we endure in godliness, all the way through to our very last step.<sup>2</sup> Paul talks this in 2 Timothy 4:1-8. Let's begin near the end of today's passage. Paul makes it clear that he is getting close to "The Finish Line of his own Christian Life." He says in 2 Timothy 4:6, "...the time for my departure is near." Then he makes a bold, confident statement in 2 Timothy 4:8, "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." Paul wasn't just focused on his Heavenly Reward though. Certainly he was eager to receive "the crown of righteousness," but I'm pretty sure he was far more excited about something else.

**1. The best part of crossing the Finish Line will be WHO is waiting there to award our crown.** Let's be clear, there is something far better waiting for believers at The Finish Line than just some crown or some award. Of all of the many things that we might envision at the Finish Line, let's join the Apostle Paul in envisioning this ultimate scene:

...JESUS, waiting at The Finish Line to award us our crown!<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I wonder who the Apostle Paul was looking forward to seeing? Probably Abraham and any number of other Old Testament saints. Perhaps John the Baptist or other New Testament believers who had been martyred for their faith.

<sup>2</sup> Consider Psalm 90:12, "Teach us to number our days..."

<sup>3</sup> The Bible says that we will see Him face to face. Read Revelation 21:3-4, 22:4; Matthew 5:8, 25:23; and 1 John 3:2.

At this point in Paul's life, he probably has a clearer view of The Finish Line than he'd ever had before. From this perspective, he gives Timothy a vital and urgent charge in 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." Paul could have called Timothy to prayer or to local evangelism or to world missions, or to any number of other spiritual priorities. But the burning message on his heart is the Word of God; sound doctrine. In fact, in verse 1, He calls God as his witness. In light of the final judgment still to come, and in light of the coming Kingdom of Christ, Paul gives Timothy a charge. By extension, Paul makes this charge to you and me as well.

**2. Getting to the Finish Line will require unwavering commitment to the authority of God's Word.** The sobering importance of this charge is made clear in the very next verse. 2 Timothy 4:3 warns us, "For the time will come when people 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." Let's not be confused when Paul says, "the time WILL come." In some respects, that time had ALREADY come in Paul's day and age. And it has certainly arrived, in many ways, in our own day and age. Even now, people are resisting what they need to hear from God.<sup>4</sup> Paul is warning us here about those outside the church but also those inside the church. In other words, this is about apostasy; supposed followers of Jesus, who will become defectors from the faith.<sup>5</sup> They will stop short of the Finish Line, because they only want to hear, what THEY want to hear. Therefore, they will gather teachers to say what they want to hear. Not sound doctrine, but that which suits THEIR OWN desires.<sup>6</sup>

This is why it is SO important for us to remember what we read back in verse 2, "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." God's Word is NOT JUST for encouragement. Paul lists a 3-fold function: to correct, to rebuke, AND to encourage. I was recently given a challenging little article on the importance of God's Word. This article was written in a "tongue and cheek" sort of way. If you are familiar with C.S. Lewis' "Screwtape Letters," it was written with a similar bent. The article begins: "Our strategy is to unleash a full-scale, frontal assault on the Word of our Enemy." (The thing to understand here is that this article is written from the perspective of the devil. So "our Enemy" here refers to God.) "...to unleash a full-scale, frontal assault on the Word of our Enemy. This has been the essence of our sinister strategy from the very beginning.... The Enemy does His most damaging work to us when His Word is preached, taught, respected, and followed. There are several specific methods that you can employ as you seek to wreck the Word of our Enemy. Persuade preachers to doubt the flawless purity of the Word.... Con pastors into thinking that the Bible is just another book, and deceive them into elevating.... Personal opinion over Scripture.... Coax them never to teach what is controversial and costly but only to teach what is comforting and popular."<sup>7</sup>

Brother or Sister in Christ, let's pray together that this will never be true from our pulpit or from any of our classrooms or teachers of adults/youth/children.<sup>8</sup> This makes us all too aware of a haunting reality: Some Christians, after running the race for a while, will then choose to stop short of the Finish Line. There are lots of reasons for why this happens: For some, it's personal doubts. For others, it's the discouragement of watching other racers drop out. For some, the persecution just gets too hard.<sup>9</sup> For still others, it's the distractions of this world. We talked about this last week in 2 Timothy 4:10 when Demas deserted Paul because he loved this world. Reasons like these, can knock ANY one of

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<sup>4</sup> *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2477.

<sup>5</sup> See 2 Timothy 2:17-18, 25-26. "The central danger threatening the community and the Pauline mission is apostasy." Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, p. 602.

<sup>6</sup> In today's internet connected world, you can search for and probably find just about any version of the truth that you are looking for. Consider Judges 17:6, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." (Also 2:10-12, 21:25) One writer calls this "a reminder of the eschatological menace already at work in the church." Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, p. 595.

<sup>7</sup> Read the full article at <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2019/09/wreck-the-word-of-god/> *Tabletalk*, September 2019, pp. 11-12, "Wreck the Word of God" by Steven J. Lawson.

<sup>8</sup> Consider 2 Timothy 1:13-14.

<sup>9</sup> This is probably why Paul urges Timothy in verse 5 to "endure hardship."

us, off course. If we're not careful, if we don't heed Paul's warning about careful instruction from God's Word, then sin has a way of overtaking us.<sup>10</sup>

Even in recent news, we hear stories about Christ-followers who are considering stopping short of The Finish Line. Marty Sampson is a Hillsong worship artist who initially seemed to renounce his faith entirely. But then, he clarified that he hasn't renounced his faith, but admits that it is on "incredibly shaky ground." According to some of his own comments, Marty seems to be struggling with things like why God allows suffering.<sup>11</sup> He is also asking questions like: Why do so many preachers fall into sin? Why don't more miracles happen? And, how can a loving God send people to hell? There are good answers to all of these questions, but for Marty they are causing him to consider dropping out of the Christian Race.

Joshua Harris is another recent example of a believer who seems to be stopping short of The Finish Line. Joshua impacted the faith and relationships of thousands of Christians, including me. Some of us still remember his helpful teaching in "I Kissed Dating Goodbye." After his recent divorce, he posted THIS on his Instagram account: "...I have undergone a massive shift in regard to my faith in Jesus. The popular phrase for this is "deconstruction," the biblical phrase is "falling away." By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian."<sup>12</sup>

Stories like these, force us to come to grips with a sobering reality: ANY Christian can get knocked off course in his/her race to The Finish Line. This is why it shouldn't really surprise us, when we read the Apostle Paul saying that even someone like him could stop short. As hard as it may be for any of us to imagine Paul being disqualified from the Christian race, he admits that EVEN HE needs to be careful. Consider what he writes in 1 Corinthians 9:25-27, "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. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave **so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.**" Paul is talking about the importance of Spiritual Disciplines, of the necessity of strict spiritual training. He is again helping us to realize the daily importance of Training Ourselves to Be Godly! We do well to take heed of THIS sobering reality: the Christian Faith is hard! Consider what Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:7, "I have FOUGHT the good fight, I have FINISHED the race, I have KEPT the faith." In other words, "becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together" means that: It's a fight that needs to be FOUGHT.<sup>13</sup> It's a race that we not only need to begin, but we also need to FINISH. It's a faith that we need to KEEP, even when doubts or false teachings or worldly distractions try to pry it from our grip.<sup>14</sup> We need to keep hold of it!<sup>15</sup> This is why it is SO very important to picture The Finish Line.

**3. Visualizing The Finish Line motivates us to run diligently in the ministry to which God has called us.**

Sometimes, when we are exhausted, and we want to quit racing, we just need some rest. BUT other times, rest isn't at all what we need. What we need most, is a LOVING kick in the pants! We need correction and rebuke from God's Word.<sup>16</sup> There are times in all of our Christian lives when we get lazy, when we grow soft, and we get a little too comfortable resting on our laurels. In these times, we need someone to challenge us to keep going. Paul issues just such a challenge to Timothy in verse 5, "But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry." He tells him 4 things:

"Keep your head"<sup>17</sup> = Stay sharp; don't turn away from the truth.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Consider Genesis 4:6.

<sup>11</sup> Read more at <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/entertainment/2019/august/im-genuinely-losing-my-faith-hillsong-worship-leader-rejects-christian-beliefs> and <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/entertainment/2019/august/hillsong-leader-denies-renouncing-faith-but-says-hes-on-incredibly-shaky-ground> and <https://www.faithwire.com/2019/07/26/author-joshua-harris-kisses-his-faith-goodbye-i-am-not-a-christian/>

<sup>12</sup> Consider Matthew 28:17.

<sup>13</sup> Consider 1 Timothy 1:18-19 and 6:11-12, "...Fight the good fight of the faith..." and also 2 Timothy 2:3.

<sup>14</sup> Galatians 5:7 comes to mind, "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?"

<sup>15</sup> We need to HOLD FAST to it. Consider 2 Thessalonians 2:15 and Revelation 12:17.

<sup>16</sup> Consider Proverbs 27:6.

<sup>17</sup> "Stay focused and sober." The Greek word here is νήφω "primarily 'be sober'; in the New Testament only figuratively = be free from every form of mental and spiritual 'drunkenness', from excess, passion, rashness, confusion, etc. be well-balanced, self-controlled." Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 672). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>18</sup> See 1 Thessalonians 5:6.

“Endure hardship” = It’s not easy, but, through Christ, you’ve got this!

“Do the work of an evangelist” = share the Good News about Jesus!

“Discharge all the duties of your ministry” = I like the way the ESV translates this: “fulfill your ministry.” At Efree Bemidji, we might say, “Find Your Fit.”

Sometimes my wife Debbie rides bike next to me when I go out for a run. The only problem with this is that sometimes she’s too nice. What I mean is that she’ll say things like “oh Honey, you look tired, do you want to stop and rest? Do you need some water?” I finally had to tell her one day that comments like these aren’t necessarily helpful. Sure they are kind, they’re just not helpful. She then asked me, “well, then what should I say to encourage you.” I told her, “just tell me to shut up and run!” She gave me a quizzical look, and then got quiet for a little while. About a mile later, out of habit, she started saying nice things to me again. I just turned my head and gave her a knowing look like, “you’re doing it again Dear!” Then she got the hint and said, “shut up and run?” I replied “now you’re getting the hang of it!” Then, with the authority of a good drill sergeant, she declared, “Shut up and run Johnson!” I just smiled and picked up the pace.

Two Sundays ago, we talked about the rest/run cycle. We learned how sometimes we need to get more rest. But sometimes we need to spur one another on: “Get running!” Even in the immediate context, as Paul is recognizing that his own race is just about over, he doesn’t hesitate to spur Timothy on: Keep working hard! Run with endurance! Do the work! Carry out your ministry duties! Until you cross The Finish Line of the Christian Life, KEEP RUNNING!<sup>19</sup>

But here’s the thing, sometimes we just want the race to be over; we’ve had enough. It’s hard to keep the will to keep fighting, to keep running. We may just feel ready to retire and relax. It’s interesting that we don’t ever hear Paul talk in terms of retirement. Paul presses on in ministry until his dying breath. Even when Paul is facing his likely execution, we find him in 2 Timothy 4:13, asking Timothy to bring him his scrolls and his parchments. In other words, he is STILL reading, still studying, and still preparing for his next ministry opportunity. Because he’s not dead yet!<sup>20</sup> An idea that I’ve really grown to appreciate in the past year or so is the idea of an “Encore Ministry.” Rather than planning for our retirement, what would it mean if we planned for our “Encore Ministry?” An “encore,” as in, “we don’t want this concert to end; one more song, one more song!” Don’t you find this idea appealing? Rather than fading away into the sunset of our Golden Years, why not finish strong? After all, none of us really know how much time we have left in our race. The fact is, that Lord very likely STILL has some great things to do in/through us; He’s not finished with us yet! So let’s make the most of whatever opportunities that God continues to give us. Pastor Fred Martin is a good example of this. He’s over in Ethiopia right now, training other pastors how to teach from the Gospels.

No matter what age we are, let’s NOT stop short of the Finish Line. Let’s keep running until we break through the tape. No regrets.<sup>21</sup> Let’s “leave it all on the field.”<sup>22</sup> And then, you and I will be able to declare, with all sincerity and with deep conviction, in the words of the Apostle Paul: **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”**

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
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<sup>19</sup> I’ve had the great honor and amazing privilege of officiating at the funerals of some very godly men and women. I always feel such a mixture of grief/loss as well as joy/celebration at their homegoing. But oftentimes, I feel something else as well. As I am walking away from the final graveside burial, I often think to myself, “it’s up to the rest of us now.” In other words, their race is completed, mine is not. My time will come soon enough, but until then, I’m going to press on; I’m going to finish strong!

<sup>20</sup> See Acts 20:24. Regarding 2 Timothy 4:7, “Whereas the English word order stresses ‘I,’ the original Greek stresses ‘the good fight...the race...[and] the faith.’ ...Paul has battled for Christ’s cause. He has matched the intensity of athletes in competition.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2477.

<sup>21</sup> Listen to the song, “The Motions” by Matthew West.

<sup>22</sup> This reminds me of the chilling end of the movie, *Schindler’s List*. He is there wondering if he could have possibly done more. “This ring could have purchased 2 more Jews....” Consider Ephesians 5:15-16.