

"Finishing the Race" - Luke 2:21-40

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Luke 2:21 And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called JESUS, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.²² Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord. ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the LORD"), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." ²⁵ And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, ²⁸ he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: ²⁹ "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; ³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation ³¹ Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, ³² A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel." ³³ And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him.

³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against ³⁵ "(yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." ³⁶ Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanael, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; ³⁷ and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. ³⁸ And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. ³⁹ So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.



*For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.*² Timothy 4:6-8

Throughout Scripture, and throughout the Life and Times of Jesus, there were those who sought His coming, intensely desired His manifest in their lives and the out pouring in their world, and lived their lives in the totality of sharing in the Shekinah glory of His power. This text speaks of two of these folks. Two people who did not grow old seeking greater and greater comfort or to 'pass the mantle' on to someone else so *they* could do the hard and committed work. We do not read here of complaining or whining or any mention of retiring by a lake somewhere.

These two...like many who have followed, were "in for a penny and in for a pound." Simeon and Anna had committed their lives not just to God, but to His service. Not just to the service, but to the church. They lived everyday waiting in the anticipation of the coming of the Messiah.

We all no doubt know someone who began the race and failed to finish. They began with passion, zeal, and commitment, but over time they grew tired, distracted, discouraged, and often just flat out lazy. Not only is the latter sanctioned in our society, it's often encouraged! So we get old, retire to a rocking chair on the porch, and wait to die. Sadly, at a period in our lives where we have more time than ever to actually DO something for God and kingdom,(or at least we should unless we spent a lifetime accumulating junk to care for!) we in fact so often just kind of melt away. As the old Rock and Roll adage goes, "better to burn out than fade out." But factually many of us actually do neither, we in fact "wipe out," and we end our lives often bitter, angry, and more self-centered than ever.

Because we often fail to continue to remain humble and continue to grow spiritually right into our 'golden years' we often end up actually throwing it all away, even the years that *were* awesome and challenging! So many people come to crossroads in their lives and instead of remaining faithful and "pushing through the painful miles" of life's marathon, they act in pride and self-seeking and end up having to go through all their photo albums and throwing out a decade of life because the memories make them sad and seeing those pics make it hard to blame others for their life state.

I say all of this not to point accusatory fingers, but rather to sound the alarm for a danger that causes even me to be concerned! Even Paul seemed obsessed with the need to finish well this race...*yes race*, that he felt he was running in this life. Speaking of the trials and difficulties of life in Acts 20:24, Paul says - "*But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*"

No one sets out to fail. No one sets out to throw away their lives. Yet the fact remains that so very many of those who begin following Christ, intent on faithfulness and fruitfulness, do not finish well. And the really scary part is that the bulk of the people who failed to finish well in Scripture, failed in the last half of their lives. The reasons vary, but at the core, something caused a lack of zeal, resolve and love for Christ.

Bobby Clinton in his book, *Connecting* says: "For some it was a clear point of decision or an experience that became a fork in the road... and they did not choose the correct fork," e.g., Judas. For others it was an accumulation of small choices that moved them further away from being Christ's disciple, e.g., Demas—2 Tim. 4:10.

In 1 Cor. 9:24-26 Paul describes his disciplined training. He says He disciplined his body to make it do what it must, not what it wanted to, so that "*having preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize*"—v. 27. Then he came to the end of the race. What joy filled his heart as he testified at the end of his life: "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*"—2 Tim. 4:7.

What moved the apostle Paul to press on, to go all the way to the finish line?

What about George Mueller? What enabled him to finish well? After establishing an orphanage for 2,050 children, he continued to raise all the support for the orphanages, even while traveling 200,000 miles. The day before he died at age 93, he was still handling orphanage correspondence and protesting that he felt fine.

What about Oswald Chambers? Up to the end of his 43 years, he served the Lord in Egypt ministering to British soldiers. Oswald often said, "I don't care what God does, it's what God is that I care about." His journals and sermons even after his death, continue to bless people around the world. *My Utmost for His Highest* continues to sell well even today.

What about John Sung, a brilliant Chinese student with a Ph.D. in Chemistry? After several years at Union Theological Seminary where his faith was tested, and six months of forced confinement in psychiatric wards, he was released to return to China for 15 years, a highly effective but exhaustive ministry. Thousands were converted, and revival broke out wherever he spoke.

What steps can we take...what qualities can we seek in order to "finish well" as Paul did and those that would follow him in such a lifestyle? What did they do? What did they practice in their lives to see such become a reality? Here is a list by *Bob Stone*, (*Finishing Well*, eagleflight.org) that I found that I believe to quite accurate:

1) They had a network of meaningful relationships with peers and those they disciplined, as well as several important mentors during their lifetime—Heb. 12:1a speaks to this saying "*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...*"

Just who were these biblical "witnesses?" They were the players...those who truly ran the race. We read their names in chapter 11 of Hebrews. The likes of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses' parents, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Sampson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets, etc. Who are your "witnesses" in the stands of your life race? Those who are cheering you on?

2) They all needed to be honest and confessional about their weaknesses and sins. All these who "finished well" had "issues." Some had weight problems, were clumsy, had ailments that effectively should have benched them, life burdens, family battles, or money woes. Heb. 12:1b—"*let us throw off everything that hinders [KJV—"every weight"] and the sin that so easily entangles.*"

Those that ran the race to the end did not have an 'easy street' or a 'cushy life.' They all had a history of hard work to overcome. But they all had a history of great love and passion for Christ and the calling He had given them. Nothing else in life could compare and they were driven because of it. It is apparent too that they all needed to be honest and confessional about their weaknesses and sins. This required specific and intentional acts on their part, not just a "oh, well! c'est la vie!"

To 'finish well' does not mean we will reach some perfection any time during the race, but rather we push on, we keep pressing on toward it, and willing to set aside anything that might keep us from the goal...to keep us from finishing the race—Phil. 3:8-15a. "... *Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind...*"

Are we willing to "lay aside the weights and sins that so easily entangle us" so that we might finish well? Many of those that came to Christ and came to this fellowship eventually succumbed to the personal weaknesses that they "carried onto the field" at the beginning of the race because they never got past them...they never were able to overcome. Some fell to bondage issues of sexual promiscuity and the need to have a guy or girl on their arm. There was gambling, alcohol abuse, or the chase of career and money. Some had serious anger and bitterness issues, or were in bondage to pride. What got them at the end was invariably the same "weights and sins" that they started the race with.

Despite some stellar performance in their lives, even the great leaders too still had to fight.

- Because of constant pain C.T. Studd struggled with an addiction to morphine.
- Mueller was a man of faith, but had a reputation of being somewhat cantankerous also.
- John Sung was a great Chinese Evangelist, but was also somewhat sensationalist and often excessively critical of Westerners.
- Many folks thought Billy Sunday, the famous American evangelist, was often a little too angry in the pulpit. His sermons were long and had a reputation for driving his staff too hard.
- The great Evangelist Dwight L. Moody had several personality traits that he constantly struggled with. He was headstrong, impatient, and perhaps overly sensitive to criticism.

To finish well means we have to deal with those weaknesses and sins that tangle us up. For these folks, the scriptural players, and all of us that have followed, there *are* and *were* decisive moments of confession and repentance that took place sometime after they had walked with the Lord, sometimes many years later. It wasn't always pretty or easy, but the sins that entangled the feet had to be dealt with.

3) They persevered in difficult times and were disciplined in important areas of their lives—Heb. 12:1c. "...*and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*" They had strength under control. They were tough when things were tough. They endured even though they were sick, persecuted, and frail.

Recently a young man by the name of Jason Day won the 2015 PGA golf tournament. I am not a fan of golf, but I am always drawn to the stories and the journeys of such who aspire to achieve. Jason had a long and embattled career...with some successes and many losses. He did not seem to be the greatest skilled player but he just kept on with great diligence. Year after year practicing and playing golf into the night in order to win. His story is the stuff of Hollywood and he finally came to that day...with one final putt on the final green, he won the highest award in golf. He stood on the that green and just wept. It didn't matter that he was in full public view. He had made it. He finished the race. And that was for *golf*. What about our race for God, kingdom, and eternity?

In order to finish "the race marked out for us," gifts, skills, disciplines and perseverance must be developed in keeping with the unique race that we are running. Each race is different. Each person will need to develop these areas and the perseverance critical to his particular race.

4) They had perspective that enabled them to focus on what was really important ...on the eternal realm, not just on the immediate—Heb. 12:2—"*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*"

Perspective enables seeing the present circumstances in relationship to a long-range view. People who finished well kept their eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of their faith. People who finished well focused on the areas He's concerned about and sustained that focus. In doing so we are far less apt to get off on tangents;

To "*fix our eyes on Jesus*" means we are aware of rival attractions, deliberately walking away from distracting things in this world. In other words, "the runner must keep his eyes fixed on Jesus, not only at the first moment of the race, but constantly during the whole struggle." The runner who finishes well "...knows Christ is always near and in sight." (Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews*, IVP, p. 228.)

5) They enjoyed intimacy with Christ and experienced repeated times of inner renewal Heb. 12:3—"*Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*" We can read all the inspirational records and we can attempt to imitate all the godly men and women around us, but it's got to be more than that. It all has to be more than an awe motivated scene from "Chariots of Fire. "

The late great pastor-author Ray Stedman said this: *(others) can inspire... challenge us to mobilize our resources, clench our fists, set our jaws and determine that we shall be men and women of faith in the 20th century. But if that is our only motivation, we shall soon run out of gas. It all begins to fade, and after a few weeks, we are right back in the same old rut.*" (Ray Stedman, *How to Live What You Believe*, Regal Books, 1974, p. 164.)

What will enable us to keep going in the race? "*Consider him who endured such opposition...*" "Consider" means to think over, reflect upon, meditate on. When we look at the conditions our Lord faced in His earthly ministry, we see that He had to constantly endure stubborn people, who refused to believe what He said. It was true even of His disciples.

That is what the Christian life will be like. If you reflect on Christ, His attitude, His strength, His love, His patience, His words; there will be a fantastic effect. The result will be, "...so that you will not grow weary and lose heart..."

How do we maintain that consideration, reflection, and meditation on Christ? A growing intimacy and relationship with Him takes place only in our inner life. It's spending time with Jesus and seeking to obey and join Him as ministers and servants in the kingdom of God.

6) They maintained a positive, humble, and transparent learning attitude and life-style all their lives, and were committed to the Lord and His Word as the main source of that learning —2 Tim. 3:16; Matt. 11:28.

James McDonald gives us a list of self-questions to consistently and even constantly ask ourselves to keep us on course:

Do I hunger after God?
Does God's Word govern my life?
Do I grieve over sin?
How quickly do I repent when I see my wrong?
Am I sensitive to the Spirit's prompting me?
Do I obey?
Is my faith growing?