

Finishing Well

Ephesians 6:21-24

21 So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. 22 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts. 23 Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible. (Ephesians 6:21-24 (ESV))

These closing words in this passage are not only the closing words of this letter to the Church of Ephesus, they will also turn out to have been some of the closing words of the life of the Apostle Paul. A short time following the writing of this letter, Paul would write a letter to Timothy, his beloved son in the Lord, which is believed to be his last letter before He was executed by the Emperor. In 2 Timothy we read,

6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 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 (ESV))

I have pondered . . . what will be my own final thoughts when it comes time for the last chapter of my life to come to a close. Age has a way of bringing such thoughts to a person's mind, and especially now for me because soon I will enter into those years that some have cleverly dubbed "borrowed time", those years that follow the three score and ten years that the Lord has allotted to the lives of men, those words in Psalm 90, verse 10.

10 The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. (Psalm 90:10 (KJV))

My days of entrance into those extra years spoken about here begin in just a few weeks. Thankfully, I am in relatively good health right now and perhaps I might reach the "fourscore years", though I don't necessarily hope or even wish for it.

My life thus far, my threescore and ten years have been such delightful years. I could not have asked for them to have been better, nor do I think I might improve on those years during the next ones ahead of me. I have known the Lord as my Savior most of my years and have "joyed" in His presence and in all the labors of my life.

I do also accept the warning that is given here in these words, that while I have labored and sorrowed in some of my earlier years, there is still much labor and sorrow ahead for me. With the inevitable deterioration of body and mental abilities that is common to older age, most likely my labor and my sorrow will be far greater than any of the sufferings I have experienced thus far.

And also, besides my own personal labors and sorrows, in our nation today, the words of a popular song of some years ago are quickly coming true, “the times, they are a changing”. And the change is obviously not a good one, but one of steady and marked decline, especially in the things that really matter to our daily lives. One of the “prophets” of our day has said that in these recent years, our nation has reached and then passed a “tipping point” in its moral behavior, so much so that our people have truly become reprobate and are becoming more so with each passing day. And I can fully agree with him.

And so, as I consider and ponder about the next few years of my life, I must confess, I do not look forward to them. This country and the people I love truly are sliding headlong into a state of ungodliness from which they will most likely never return, and that will most certainly break my heart. And yes, I know that my words do sound bleak, but those are the facts before us.

But with that being said, may I also quickly add that our nation, and we, and our loved ones are not without hope.

Each time that I ponder the blessings of that word, “hope”, I am encouraged, because hope is such a very good and loving gift to every soul, given directly from the hand of God. And yes, He does give “hope” even to the worst of unbelievers. You can hear their voice that word “hope” certainly as often as do those who are devout believers in Christ. But unfortunately, the hope within the heart of an unbeliever is not the same kind of hope that resides within the heart of a devout believer? Unfortunately, the hope that wells up within an unbeliever’s heart has no real source to appeal too. And they really have no idea from whence their relief will come. And so they simply cry out to some unknown source. But even so, they do still have hope.

Thankfully, those of us who have the Spirit of Christ abiding within us know from whence our help comes, it is from Christ and Christ alone. And may I add, our hope is also in the plans that God has for us. Because, though the times really are “a changing”, and yes, the outlook for the return of our nation to Godly morality looks extremely bleak, God really does have a plan. His plan is for His beloved children to “prosper and not suffer harm, to give us a future and a hope”. (Jeremiah 29:11)

And so, as we read some of the Apostle Paul's last words to his congregation in Ephesus, and also His affectionate words to Timothy, we can see that he really wants those dear ones to have hope. And a very important part of his message to them is that they can have hope and encouragement even in the worst of times and treatment. And this is especially helpful to me as I enter into my years of "borrowed time", that I can have real hope not only for myself but also for all those that I love and pray for each day, regardless of their circumstances, or my own.

And it is God's greatest desire for us that we "finish our race well", that we not falter in our last few steps of life, but that we bring glory and honor to Him right up until our last breath.

Here, we can clearly see that the Apostle Paul is "finishing his race well". And He wants his beloved children in the Lord to know that regardless of his circumstances, he personally is doing really well. Listen again to Paul's words!

21 So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. 22 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts. 23 Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible. (Ephesians 6:21-24 (ESV))

May I again use the analogy of finishing a race, because those words are so appropriate? In Philippians 3, Paul said,

10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:10-14 (NIV))

And again from 2 Timothy,

6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 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 (ESV))

What wonderful and encouraging words these are to us, but there is also a challenge within them. Because as we look around us at the current condition of the “soul” of our nation, and as we see how all the walls of purity and righteousness are being torn down, we know that soon not one stone will remain standing to protect the souls of men. But even with all of that being true, I am convinced that God does not want me, or any of us, to allow those circumstances of life to discourage us in our race. He wants you and me to do just as the Apostle Paul did here, “finish this race well”, to press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:14 (NIV))

Long distance runners describe a special burst of energy that comes to them as they get near to the finish line. They call that special burst of energy their “kick”. Here, the Apostle Paul could see his “finish line” just ahead of him and he was experiencing that special burst of Spiritual energy, and he knew that he would finish his race well.

As I have pondered these things for myself, I have thought about the “heroes of the faith” that have encouraged my life, and how they so obviously “finished their race well”. I thought first of Ralph Newman. Ralph lived every day as a strong “driving force”, in his family, in his church, and in the ministry at French Camp. He lived every day to its fullest, always ministering to others with all his heart, but also thoroughly and personally enjoying each of the days of his life. And the day that God called Ralph home, he was doing the same thing that he did every other day, living and enjoying a Godly life.

Another hero of the faith, my favorite, was Dr. Paul Culley. I came to know him late in his life. He had spent the most of it as a Medical Missionary and as a discipler of other Missionaries. Thankfully, Dr. Culley came to live out his last years at French Camp where I spent many delightful hours fellowshiping with him and learning from his wisdom. And again, he died as he lived, ministering every day of it.

One of my most favorite memories of a saint “finishing her race well” was of an old saintly worker at French Camp, our Librarian, Miss McGinnis. She spent her last years ministering daily to the students and to her fellow workers. And it was her loving custom, on certain occasions, to bake pies and cakes to share with the other teachers. On the morning that she died, I had the privilege of coming to her bedside and seeing her lifeless body, her soul already in heaven, but surrounded in her bed by a dozen or so freshly baked cakes and pies that she had intended to share with her fellow workers that day.

I thought as I looked at Miss McGinnis lying there in her final rest, “What do I want to be doing on the day when God comes to take me home?” It was that! Miss McGinnis was

doing what she always did. She was ministering and giving and showing love to others. And I wanted to be doing exactly that! Jesus said,

40 . . . 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25:40 (NIV))

Folks, as of this moment in time, each of us has at least this one day and perhaps a few days more to live. Should we not live them well and finish them well; because the moment will surely come when we will breathe our last, and at that moment we will stand before our Lord Jesus, the "Righteous Judge" over all the earth. What do you want to have been doing in those final moments?

I'll tell you what I want to be doing. I want to be running as hard as I can run toward that finish line, giving all that I have to the race that God has set before me. I don't need to be looking around me to see if anyone is about to beat me to the finish line. Thankfully, it is not that kind of race. To the contrary, it will be my joy to see others racing right on ahead of me, arriving securely in the arms of Christ.

This is a race for the hearts and souls of men. And because it is that kind of race, we must take into account that we will engage in spiritual battles along the way, spiritual battles that will take their toll on our bodies; and because of that, we will need to run our race bedecked in the "full armor of God", fighting with the "sword of the Spirit" in one hand, while still running with all our heart, never, never giving up or giving in even for a moment.

Here in these closing words of Paul, he wanted a friend to carry his last words out to others so that they would not only know how he was doing personally, but also how he was continuing to minister even while he was in prison chains and in his final days of life.

Perhaps, my words to you today will accomplish some of the same for me, that you might see and hear how I am doing personally, but more than that, how that it is my sincerest desire to continue to give Christ to anyone who will listen.

And this is how I want to spend the remaining portion of my race, crying out to you and to others, especially my beloved family members, pleading with each one to "receive Christ" before it is too late. In the words of Romans 11,

14 If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them. (Romans 11:14 (KJV))

Again, I do realize that as I engage in these “fourth score” days of my life, the outlook for righteousness in the nation around us is bleak, which means that ministry to our loved ones will get more and more difficult. Children of today, even those in their twenties and thirty years of life, have a new and more liberal misguided view of God’s plans and His purposes, especially His laws on moral behavior.

But I do fully intend to continue to “speak the truth in love” whether they listen or not. And I do fully intend to give the gospel, whether they listen or not, because this gospel is the only means by which their souls can be saved.

And to my brethren who know and love the Lord Jesus as I do, I do also want to lock arms together with you to help you and have you help me as we strain forward together to finish this race with all the fervor and hope we have within us.

These words from Philippians 3, as we close

10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:10-14 (NIV))