

WD January 3, 2022
“Finishing Well”

It is not how one starts but how one finishes something that matters. Every year for the Kentucky Derby the world’s fastest horses break out of the gate in hopes of being the first across the finish line. The end of the race is always the critical measure of the race. A horse can start off strong but falter before it gets to the end. Another horse may somehow have a great day, run from behind, catch up, and even win. The point is simple the end of the race determines who wins... not the beginning.

At the end of his life while writing from prison awaiting trial Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:6-8. ⁶ For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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.

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” How many of us have kept what we started with? I have had the privilege to meet several married couples who have been married fifty, sixty, even seventy years. These are folks that have endured and have kept the covenant that they had made at their weddings. Such people are hardly the same naïve, ‘googalee-eyed’, youngsters who walked down the aisle. These are people who have learned to endure the relentless pressures of life, the demands of raising children, and have grown in wisdom over the years. Their shared history is an unbroken bond of strength and somewhere along the way they couldn’t imagine being without the other. And when one passes it is not uncommon that the other spouse is not far behind. They finish well and kept what God had blessed them with.

Finishing well does not just happen by accident. It is always a deliberate thing. I can’t tell you how many projects I have around my house that I have started but haven’t quite finished. Slowly, however, I am getting them done. I had to decide to stop looking at them, fretting over them, and finally just start doing them. Things like trim work in the basement. Finishing up a table that I have to make legs for and a door that I have been working on for four years. My list is always as long as my arm. Much of it gets put off because life gets busy, because I get tired, because other things pop up needing my attention, and because of a lot of stuff that comes and goes.

It can become like the illustration I heard long ago (Maybe from Stephen Covey in one of his books). If you want to fill a glass jar with rocks one should start with the biggest ones first. If you don’t all the little rocks will not leave room for the big ones. The point of course, is if we don’t deliberately make room for the important stuff then the busy stuff will crowd out the important stuff. For example, being with your kids, making a big deal of their birthdays and accomplishments or of your anniversary, or just taking time out together each week. Put the people in your life ahead of all the emergencies, crises, the overtime, and all the other things that can nibble at our time. Each opportunity we have has to be weighed and prioritized. It always takes effort. Fight the good fight of family as well as faith.

Finishing well also keeps a destination in mind. That means I cannot remain where I started. If a horse remained in the gate because its rider was happy there the whole point of being in the gate would be lost. The starting gate is just that, a starting point. Likewise, it is unreasonable for a married couple to imagine that they will be the same people as they were on the day of their wedding. I know I wouldn’t want to be that same young, immature man that I was twenty-five years ago. I look back and see how far life has come. Now I have two grown boys who are married themselves. I can’t imagine going back. If I stayed in the gate of marriage (so to speak) I would not know the blessings of the race to this point. The destination for marriage may remain unknown but marriage always moves us in some direction. Perhaps if we could have a destination in mind for marriage it would be connected to what Paul illustrates in Ephesians 5. Marriage is meant to draw us into a deep connection, a reflection of Jesus’ relationship with His bride, the church.

Faith is much more clear in its destination. In 1 Corinthians 13:11-12 Paul writes “¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

We are meant to mature beyond where we start in the faith. Faith is meant to become more and more familiar with the Word and God’s ways; grow in compassion, and in a prayerful spiritual life. We are meant to

put childhood behind us to see Jesus more plainly and more fully. The destination in fact is to be with Jesus, that is to know Him fully rather than only in vague bits and pieces. To run the race then is to aim for the finish line while spiritually, intellectually, and in practice progress to become more and more of an 'adult' in the Lord.

Don't we do this with schooling in general? We grow and learn to be prepared for what comes next. First, grade studies prepare for second grade and so on until we are prepared to walk on our own. The practice of prayer as one example becomes more comfortable and more natural as we grow from a first-grade faith to a second grade faith and so on. We are meant to mature beyond the sinful selfish person to a genuine Christian follower of Jesus. Ultimately the destination is Jesus Himself, to know Him fully even as we are fully known by Him.

Finally, this brings us to the ultimate blessing of finishing well. Being with the Lord. Let's listen to those words again--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.” Let's be very clear. It does not matter where the thief on the cross started. It only mattered where he finished. It does not matter where Paul started but we see how strongly he finished. Our own origins are not as significant as what our destination is once we our life concludes on this side of creation. When we are looking at the end of our lives as Paul was in 2 Timothy the important stuff will not be a degree from Pharisee school, or having lots of likes on faceplant, or how successful our career was. It will only matter how close we are to Jesus. To finish well means that Jesus was the center of it all. And the ultimate blessing is being with Jesus and receiving His crown of righteousness.

So, as we get started with 2022 what will we do to run our race better? Will you keep the faith this year? By God's grace we hope to finish this year a little closer to Jesus and a little more mature in our faith than when started. Even if everything else crumbles this would make for a very successful year in the eyes of the Lord. May this being the kind of year we have. In Jesus name have a blessed 2022. Now let's get going. The gates are open. In Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Matt Woods
John 3:30