

The Race Worth Running

2 Timothy 4: 1-8

Rev. Ed Hoekstra

Carry out your ministry fully (verse 5)! In the last days of Paul's life, he was urging the followers of Christ to stay with the course! Do not be swayed by the popular wisdom of the culture. Paul wanted the Christians to stay focused on their goals so that they could carry out their ministry fully without distraction. The temptation was to take the easy road that did not involve sacrifice of one-self. So often, people are willing to follow Christ, but are unwilling to put themselves out for the sake of others needs as Christ so clearly demonstrated.

The best run. One of the elders in the first congregation I served, was a man who practiced his faith in an everyday, inspiring way. He loved life and had a wonderful sense of humour. He was one of the village doctors, so everyone in town knew him. When someone was in for an appointment he was very respectful, but would mention to people in a non- preachy way that God loves them. My United church colleague and I joked one day that our village doctor was doing pastoral care before either of us would arrive at the bedside of someone who was in ill or in hospital. He is a passionate follower of Christ – a healer!

One day as the doctor and I were driving home from a pastoral visit, he said to me that people, including family members, will ask him what he would think if after spending all those years going to church every Sunday, and living the Christian life so fully every day, that when he died, it turned out there is nothing after death. These detractors would say that he did all these things for other people, and he could have had a life where he could have looked after his own needs and desires a lot more. In other words, what a waste! The doctor's response was first of all that he could not see that as a possibility. However, to answer the question, he said he would have no regrets. It was 'the best run' or the best life someone could have! A life of focusing on oneself does not bring satisfaction. I would have no regrets whatsoever! He went on to say that he loves waking in the morning and thanking someone (God) for the new day. Without someone to thank, you miss out on that great joy!

Looking back from the finish line (verse 6,7): Paul is looking back with great satisfaction that he had poured out his life as a sacrifice (verse 6). He has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith (verse 7). His greatest joy was to pass on the faith! It gave him so much joy, in spite of the suffering and death he would soon endure in prison as directed by Nero! While this terrible physical situation was happening to him, he was still concerned about others and the advancement of the church of Jesus Christ. Every one of us is getting closer to the finish line. As in the church at that, there are so many distractions and 'me focused' messages keeping people away from carrying out their ministry fully. It is a great joy to pass on the faith of a gracious God who loves you unconditionally and provides for you each day.

Beginning with the end in mind: Author Stephen Covey wrote the book, “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”. In one of the chapters, Covey’s basis idea is that as we move down our journey of life or as we ‘run the race’ we are to ask ourselves where we would like to be at the end of our race. In other words, what are the positive goals we are striving towards? One would then keep that picture of the destination in their mind to continually be reminded of where they want to go, so that the goal becomes reinforced and one can stay more focused on the goal. There is then a better chance that it will happen. Continually have the picture of what the end result will look like, helps one get closer to achieving it.

As a follower of Christ, are you keeping the end in mind? The people in the church in Ephesus where Timothy was ministering were like lemmings - following whatever popular spiritual notion that appealed to their greed and selfishness. They were not focused on staying the course and keeping the faith as a servant to Christ and a servant to others’. People of God: Paul is appealing to Christians of all time to stay focused on the race and keep the end in mind!

Looking ahead in hope (verse 8): At the time of the Olympic competitions in ancient Rome and vicinity, the winners of the races received a crown of garland, composed of olives, or pines, or bay leaves, etc. This crown was a great honour to receive for winning the race, but it would soon whither. Paul was saying that at the end of the race of life there awaits a ‘Crown of Righteousness’, not as a reward, but as a gift that lasts forever! This gift is not just for one victorious runner (as Paul notes), but for all of God’s children. This hope of eternal life and the loving presence of his savior, Jesus, helped to give Paul energy and keep him strong through his daily life. Paul had the picture of the end (of eternal life) in his mind, so he saw the joy of eternal life visible in his earthy, physical existence.

One could draw the analogy of when you buy a new or used car. When you start driving your new vehicle, you suddenly notice other vehicles which are the same or similar to the one you are now driving. That is because you have become familiar with the picture of your new car and you start to see it everywhere – where before you didn’t! Keep the end in mind, keep the picture of the crown of righteousness in your mind, and you will see it more readily in your everyday life.

A Grace-filled journey (Verse 8): As the doctor would say to his detractors, faith is not about the reward you will receive when you have lived your life in a good way. Eternal life is a gift given to you freely without earning it or deserving it. It is just offered to each one of us out of love. We know God’s love because God was willing to put himself aside - even to give his life as a sacrifice for each of his children. Through Jesus death and resurrection, we have the assurance we are known and loved in this life, and with his presence, we have nothing to fear, not even death!

Let’s run the race worth running, keeping your eyes focused on our loving God who calls us to get the most from life by serving God and by serving our neighbours. Amen.