

“ON YOUR MARK . . . GET SET . . . GO!”

2 Timothy 4:7

INTRODUCTION

I had you in mind when deciding on this year’s chapel ministries’ theme, “Finish the race! Keep the faith!” I’ve seen too many eager, promising students begin well here but never finish here. Sometimes they just up and quit; sometimes they implode/explode and hurt others around them; sometimes they just disappear. Well, I don’t want any of that to happen to you, so all year we’re going to repeat the phrase, “Finish the race! Keep the faith!” And tonight we’re going hear from someone who didn’t want his son in the Lord, his student minister to give up either.

Turn to 2 Timothy 4. [Read vv. 1-8]

Paul uses athletic images here to describe where he’s been, what he’s done, where he’s headed, and what he expects of Timothy. We’re going to spend most of our time in that part of the passage this evening.

MOVE I

First, let's talk about what we know about running and racing.

- What does it take to be a good runner?
- How do you know?
- What's the difference between knowing about running and knowing how to run?

Well, Paul knew how to “run” didn't he? We all know about his story of coming to Christ and his travels from one end of the Mediterranean to other to tell people about Jesus. How he sang in his jail cell and preached to the jailer. How he survived shipwrecks and snakebites and riots and beatings. How he wrote to people who loved him and wrote to people who didn't. How gave himself up for the cause of the Christ and how it ultimately led to his death. Paul knew how to “run.”

So, when he's telling Timothy, “It's your turn to run this race and here's how you do it,” he get's Timothy's attention because he knows Paul's speaking from first hand experience. And we should listen to Paul, too.

MOVE II

The first thing I want us to hear has to do with what kind of race Paul is describing here. It's not a sprint, it's not 440, it's not mile, it's not even a marathon: it's a cross country run. (Image 1) And the run doesn't happen just on a track, or in a stadium, or even on a road. It happens wherever the race may take us. (Image 2)

You might be a cross country runner if . . . ¹

You might be a Christian ministry runner if . . .

Another way that this is a cross country run is that there are obstacles between us and the finish line. The original cross country races started at one part of the country and aimed for another and the runners climbed, jumped, waded, and crawled through whatever the terrain brought their way.² (Image 3)

While Paul certainly dealt with physical obstacles during his ministry - storms at sea, desert dryness, physical torture, numbing cold - the most challenging obstacles were the human kind. He describes them in verses 3-4: "For the time will come when men will

¹ <http://va.milesplit.us/forums/Virginia/topics/25857> September 17, 2008

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross_country_running September 17, 2008

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. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.”

Paul’s telling Timothy here, (Image 4) “This resistance, these obstacles are par for the course, they come with the territory. You’ll have to climb, jump, wade, or crawl through them just like I did.

(Image 5) They are not a reason to quit. They are a part of run.”

Obviously, the same holds true for us. Not everyone to whom we minister will welcome us with open arms or join with us in the cause of Christ. Not everyone with whom we share the gospel will respond to the love of Christ. And not everyone we know will agree with our decision to live our lives for Christ. The cross country run of Christian ministry will take us to people who will try to block our way. Paul’s word to us here is, “Keep going, keep running. Finish the race!

Keep the faith!”

MOVE III

There are some things about the run Paul has in mind that are different from a typical race. These differences also have something to say about our ministries.

First, the people with whom we run this race are not our competitors. (Image 6) They are our teammates, our co-runners, our brothers and sisters in Christ. We're not trying to beat them, to finish ahead of them, or to make sure they lose. We're running with them, we're together on the run, and it's our goal that we all cross the finish line with our faith in Christ intact. We don't want anyone to be left behind. (Image 7)

The second difference is that the cross country run of Christian ministry is different for everyone. (Image 8) While it's true that we're all "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ," we will all get there in different ways. Each course, each path, each ministry is unique for each minister of the gospel. We will find our course, find our path, find our ministry by "keeping our eyes on Jesus, the author

and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:2) So, while we’re running together, we are each to run the race that God has set for us.

A third difference is that the finish line is unmarked. As much as cross country runners like to run, they want to know there’s a finish line and then pace themselves to finish strong. They know where the end of the race is. Now, I don’t mean to imply this Christian ministry race is like Forrest Gump who ran because . . . (Image 9) and stopped because . . . (Image 10)

The finish line of our ministries comes when God says, “Well done, good and faithful servant . . . Enter into the joy of your master.” (Matt. 25:23) And he calls us to “run” each day with his joy in mind.

One final thing that makes this race, this run of Christian ministry unique: it’s run before an Audience of One. (Image 11) Verse 1: “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: run . . .” God, the Creator of the universe, the Savior of our souls, the Spirit of our lives in him has “season tickets - trackside” for each of our runs. He’s not a missing step. He’s encouraging us

along. He's guiding our feet. He's coaching us on. He's empowering our run. And He'll be us with to the end of race.

Now that's not to say that no one else is watching, that no one else is paying attention to what we're doing. But it is to say that we're not running the race for them; we're running it for Him. Will others learn from our run? We hope so. Will others be encouraged to finish the course? May it be so. It's why Paul can say to Timothy, "I want you to finish well. I want you to know what you're facing. I want you to embrace the race. Follow my lead." He's finished the race, kept the faith. But when Paul crossed the finish line, even with the great cloud of witnesses surrounding him (Hebrews 12:1), Paul was focused on thing: seeing Jesus face to face.

There is one final piece to the run. It's the celebration that happens when the race is over, the finish line has been crossed, and the runner is able to rest. It's the "award ceremony" and the runner steps up to receive his/her prize: the crown of righteousness.

This prize is not a golden crown which awards righteousness to the runner. (Image 12) It's a wreath of Bay Laurel leaves and

branches which recognizes the righteousness with which the runner has run his/her race. And it's waiting for all Christians ministers who run their cross country race of ministry with Christlike love and character.

CONCLUSION

As I said in the beginning, I've had you in mind from before the year began. I want you to finish well. I want you to know what you're facing. I want you to keep running.

So, I have to ask - is there anything in your life right now that will keep you from doing so? Are you willing to give it up so you can "finish the race and keep the faith? (Image 13)





