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Finishing The Race Set Before Us

Acts 20:22-24

Introduction

1. Have you ever started something which you didn't finish?
 - a. An assignment at school or work.
 - b. A project around the house.
 - c. A puzzle, song or painting.
2. This year 2,871 athletes competed in the Winter Olympics held in Milano, Italy.
3. Of those, six athletes failed to finish their event due to injuries.
4. Approximately 100 failed to finish their event for other reasons.
5. Several were disqualified.
6. There is a race in which the majority of us here this morning are entered.
7. It is a race of eternal significance, one which requires endurance on our part.
8. If you aren't in this race, my advice to you is that you enter before it is too late.
9. If you are running this race, I encourage you not to quit.
10. In our text this morning, we find the apostle Paul determined to finish his course and the ministry which he had received from the Lord Jesus.
11. How was he determined to do this?
12. In the verses read for us a moment ago, Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, has made it possible for us to listen to the apostle Paul's final words to the elders of the church in Ephesus.
13. As we noticed last week, Paul spent almost three years teaching and building up the church there — He was so successful in his work that, as Luke records, "all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10).
14. Now, on his way back home from his third missionary journey, he stopped by

the seaport of Miletus, some 20 miles south of Ephesus, and sent for these men (Acts 20:17).

15. He knew that he would never see these men again, and because of this he wanted to encourage them in their work, warn them of dangers which lay ahead and tell them what was necessary for him to finish his course.
16. In Hebrews 12:2, the writer encourages us to “run with endurance the race set before us.”
17. In the few minutes we have together, I would like for us to look at what Paul says is necessary us to finish the race set before us.
17. While I realize that Paul spoke only to these elders from Ephesus, I believe the message he communicated to them is one for us today.

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I. If I Am To Finish The Race Set Before Me, I Must . . .

A. BE CONTENT WITH NOT KNOWING TOMORROW'S DETAILS

“And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there” (Acts 20:22)

1. Paul says that, while he is on his way to Jerusalem, he doesn't know the specifics of what will happen to him there.
2. Translators disagree over whether the word “Spirit” means . . .
 - a. Paul's spirit (“bound in the (my) spirit” (KJV, NKJV, HCSB)) = “feeling driven by my spirit to do this”).
 - b. God's Spirit (“bound (compelled) by God's Spirit” = “feeling driven on by the Holy Spirit”).
3. It seems more likely that it is the Spirit of God which is driving Paul — the same Spirit which has directed his ministry from the first day until now.
 - a. It was the Holy Spirit which sent them out from Antioch on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:2, 4).
 - b. It was also the Holy Spirit which prevented them from speaking the word in Asia (Acts 16:6) and from going into Bithynia (Acts 16:7).

4. Now it was the Holy Spirit which was compelling Paul to go on to Jerusalem, even though he had no knowledge as to what would happen to him there.
5. There is a point here which we must not miss.
6. Because, Paul's desire was to do God's will in all circumstances, he didn't need to know the details of what lay ahead.

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7. In Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" he addressed the people's concern about the necessities of their lives.

"Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' "For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."
(Matthew 6:31-32, NASB95)

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6. He concluded by saying, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."
(Matthew 6:33-34, NASB95)
7. There is a hymn written by Ira Stampill over 75 years ago which speaks to this:

**"I don't know about tomorrow, I just live from day to day;
I don't borrow from its sunshine, For its skies may turn to gray:
I don't worry o'er the future, For I know what Jesus said,
And today I'll walk beside Him, For He knows what is ahead."**

**"Many things about tomorrow I don't seem to understand;
But I know who holds tomorrow, And I know who holds my hand."**

8. Many of us here today would not do well in these circumstances.
9. We want everything mapped out. We want to know every detail.

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10. Listen to something which James had to say to the Christians of his day

(James 4:13-15).

“Come now, you who say,

“Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.”

Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.

You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.

Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.”” (James 4:13–15, NASB95)

11. What God requires of each of us is that we live our lives faithfully before Him and let come what may.

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B. STAY THE COURSE IN SPITE OF THE AFFLICTIONS THAT MAY AWAIT ME

“Except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me” (Acts 20:23).

1. While Paul did not know the details of what awaited him in Jerusalem, he did know that “bonds and afflictions” awaited him.
 - a. Following his return to Jerusalem, Paul would be arrested in the Temple courtyard due to a riot, not of his making (Acts 21:33-23:11).
 - b. Because of a conspiracy to kill him, Paul was later transferred from Jerusalem to Caesarea where he was held for two years (Acts 23:12 - 26:32).
 - c. Eventually, He appealed to Caesar and, after a perilous journey which involved a shipwreck, he was transferred to Rome where he lived under house arrest for two years (Acts 27:1 - 28:31).
2. No, Paul did not retire from his mission work to one of the Greek isles in the Mediterranean.
3. Instead, he continued to fight the good fight.
 - a. In Jerusalem, he tried to share the message of what the Lord was doing through him with those who had just been beating him (Acts

21:32; 22:1-21)

- b. In Caesarea, he made his defense before the Roman governors, Felix a (Acts 24:10-21) and Festus, as well as King Agrippa and his sister, Bernice (Acts 26:1-29).
- c. Even when he was under house arrest in Rome, Paul welcomed everyone who came to see him and preached to them about the kingdom of God and taught them about Jesus (Acts 28:30-31).
- d. In his letter to the saints in Philippi, Paul said that “the whole praetorian guard” had learned of his “imprisonment in the cause of Christ” (Philippians 1:13).
- e. Because of Paul there were even those in “Caesar’s household” who had obeyed the gospel (Philippians 4:22).

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4. As far as you and I are concerned, the question is not whether we will experience hardship, affliction, trouble or pain because of our faith — this is a given.
 - a. “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22, NASB95)
 - b. “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Timothy 3:12, NASB95)
5. The real question is whether or not we will remain faithful because we believe our faithfulness to the Lord is more precious than life itself.

“For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps,” (1 Peter 2:20–21, NASB95)

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“but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to

glorify God in this name.” (1 Peter 4:16, NASB95)

6. It was our glorified Lord who through the apostle John told the saints in Smyrna, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Revelation 2:10, NASB95)

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C. REFUSE TO COUNT MY LIFE AS DEAR TO MYSELF

“But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.” (Acts 20:24, NASB95)

1. Notice what Paul said to these elders from Ephesus: “I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself”
 - a. One translation renders this as “I consider my life worth nothing to me” (NIV84).
 - b. Still another translation has, “I count my life of no value to myself” (HCSB).
2. If we fast forward to the last leg of Paul’s journey to Jerusalem, we find him staying in the home of the evangelist Philip in Caesarea (Acts 21:8).
3. While he was there, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea (Acts 21:9).
4. He took Paul’s belt and with it he bound his own hands and feet.
5. He then told Paul that this was what the Jews in Jerusalem would do to him before handing him over to the Gentiles (Acts 21:9).
6. This prompted those with Paul to beg him not to go up to Jerusalem.

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7. Paul responded to them, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for

the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13).

8. Why would Paul say these things?
9. It is because of what he had already said to the elders there in Miletus — “so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.” (Acts 20:24, NASB95).
10. Paul had a “course” to complete and a “ministry” to finish, both of which he had “received from the Lord Jesus.”
11. Paul’s goal was to finish what he had started — that which the Lord had set before him.

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12. In Hebrews 12:1-2, you and I are encouraged to “run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1b-2, NASB95).

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13. At the end of his life, while in a prison cell awaiting his execution, Paul would use these words again:

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future 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 4:7–8, NASB95)
14. For Paul, finishing his course and ministry meant coming to the end of his life having shared the good news of God’s grace with everyone he could.
15. It is very important that you and I are not ashamed of the gospel because this is the means by which God has chosen to save those who are lost.
16. Nothing is more precious than the good news of God’s salvation through His Son.

Conclusion

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1. Everything we endure in this life will be worth it:

“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:11–12, NASB95)

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“But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.” (Matthew 24:13, NASB95)

“He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.” (John 12:25, NASB95)

“For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,” (2 Corinthians 4:17, NASB95)

2. How are you spending your life?
3. The greatest investment you will ever make as a Christian is in the eternal soul of another human being.
4. If you aren't a Christian this morning, it is vital that you first commit to the salvation of your own eternal well being.
5. If you haven't surrendered your life to Jesus in obedient faith why not do so today?