

“Sealed with an Inscription”

Reading: 2 Timothy 2:1-13, 14-26

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In our discussion last Wednesday evening on this chapter of *The Story*, I asked the group a question and then realized that I didn't know how I would answer it. I asked a really hard question and didn't even mean it to be as hard as it was. Our chapter of *The Story* focuses on the last years of the Apostle Paul's life and how he continued to preach the gospel and build up the church and invest in the next generation even when he was imprisoned, and we read those stirring lines that are kind of Paul's valedictory statement: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." And the question I asked was this: when you get to that point in your life of looking back over the chances you've had and the time you've been given and the grace God has shown you, what do you want to be able to say about how you've done? What criteria will you use to judge yourself and your faithfulness when you get to the end of your race? I asked that question last Wednesday and I've been struggling to answer it for myself ever since.

And I don't ask it to be morbid and gloomy and make us all think about how we're all going to die someday. The point is not to make us all think of our own mortality, the point is to encourage us to focus our efforts in being faithful to God. I mean, it's one thing to be faithful in the here and now — I'm not committing any sins right now and I'm in church and I'm good with God right now — but it's another thing to be faithful overall, to be able to say that not only am I taking a good step forward today, but to say in the end that I ran the entire race well and finished it well. We're getting near the end of the Bible, near the end of our story, near the end of Paul's teaching and travels and indeed his life. When we get to these endings, it's natural to stop and reflect on the journey. How do we make sure our stories with God end well? How can we finish the race well?

We could spend hours naming the names of those who did not finish well. It's a tragic thing to watch. How many pastors could we name who started well and built up impressive, influential ministries, only to then have impressive, influential moral failures, either with their finances or their relationships? How many politicians could we name who promised great things, only to collapse in power-mad scandals? How many businesses have been ruined by leaders who have fallen prey to temptation and greed? I am hardly the first pastor to preach a sermon on the need to finish well, and I'm sure I won't be the last, because there's clearly a need.

In fact, there was a need in Paul's time. Even in the first generation of Christians, some could not finish well. Immediately after Paul gives his "I have fought the good fight" speech, he mentions that one of his companions, named Demas, loved the world and has deserted Paul. Harry Emerson Fosdick once preached a sermon about Demas, and he pointed out that Demas gets mentioned in the New Testament three times. In the book of Philemon, he's mentioned as one of Paul's "fellow workers." In Colossians, he's just "Demas," with nothing else to commend him, but at least he's there. And then, in 2 Timothy, "Demas has deserted me." There is hope of redemption; we know of many examples of people who made terrible mistakes but then went on to finish well regardless. But when you begin with such promise and fail in the end, it's tragic. "Demas, my fellow worker," "Demas," "Demas has deserted me."

We're nearing the end of the Bible, but the point all along has been that the story of the Bible — the story of God lovingly redeeming His people and working to restore them to a holy relationship in His presence — that story did not end when the Bible was finished, it continues to this very moment in this place with you and me. So as the story continues, we need to learn how to continue living in that story. Beginnings are great; you've got to start somewhere. I pray that every one of you has had a beginning to your story with God. But how do we continue that story to its glorious end?

Some of you may think I'm preaching this message a little out of time; maybe you're too young to think about finishing well. Maybe some of you are old enough that you think your story is already practically ended, and you've finished as well as you're going to. But not one of us knows what tomorrow brings. Some of you who are more than twice my age might outlive me. You might have more time to choose your ending than I do. Finishing well in the end is the product of finishing well in each step along the way. Paul's message in 2 Timothy is not just about Paul finishing well as an old man, it's also about Paul setting up Timothy, a young man, to finish well in turn.

There really is good news here; this is not supposed to be a dark, depressing message. The good news is that it is never too late to finish well. As long as you have breath in you, your story can end well. Whichever way your story is going now, it can end well. Even when you don't think you have the strength or the faith to make it to the end, or even to take it to the next level, your story can end well. And at the same time, it is never too early to begin finishing well.

So what does this look like? How do we judge a life lived well, and in the meantime how do we set a course for our lives to end well at some undetermined future point? In our reading in 2 Timothy 2, Paul takes some time to point out some teachers who have strayed from that course toward finishing well, because they've begun leading people astray with false teaching. And Paul says that "nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are His.'" There is a solid foundation, one that is solid and lasting enough to be sealed with an inscription, and that foundation is to belong to God. Sounds like kind of a cop-out answer that a preacher would give, doesn't it? But it goes deeper than that. "Here is a trustworthy saying," Paul says a few verses earlier. "If we died with Him, we will also live with Him. If we endure, we will also reign with Him. If we disown Him, He will also disown us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot disown Himself."

For our stories to end well, there must be this relationship of mysterious mutuality with Christ. Our lives are this perpetual dance of back-and-forth in which our actions and God's acts of grace become intertwined: God "graces" us, and we respond, and He gives us more grace, and we respond in faith again, and on and on to the end of the race, step by step. We die *with Him*, and we live *with Him*; we endure, that is, we wait in patience through the difficult times and the doubtful times, and then we are lifted up to reign with Him. He acts, we act, back and forth, with one exception: His actions are unfailingly faithful. If we are faithless, He remains faithful.

I get the sense from this letter that Paul is mellowing a bit as he ages, and as he does so he's making sure to focus on what really matters. I think back to our chapter from last week, when we read about Paul in Corinth years earlier, when he was rejected and abused by some of the residents of the city. His response to their disagreement then was to shake out his clothes in protest and shout, "Your blood be on your own heads!" It's hardly the only example we have of Paul being less than

diplomatic in his disagreements with others. But now, in 2 Timothy, he says that “opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance.” It’s not that he’s any less zealous for the truth in his old age; after all, in this same chapter he talks about the teachings of Hymenaeus and Philetus spreading “like gangrene,” so he’s still quite capable of turning a phrase. But he’s intensified his focus on what matters, the truth, and anything that distracts him from that isn’t worth the time.

So what is the truth? What is most worthy of our focus if we are to finish well? Paul keeps coming back to this separation between the world and the truth, or between our desires and the truth. All along in our story there has been that separation between God’s way and *not* God’s way, and finishing well means continuing along on God’s way. There is, of course, the focus on remaining faithful to God, continuing to trust Him to take care of us and save us, continuing to grow closer in love to Him. But there’s more than that if we are to finish well. Faithfulness to God implies using whatever gifts He gives us. Faithfulness is not merely an internal disposition, it is also something that permeates our actions; we do not merely refrain from doing the bad things God calls us away from, we also put into action the good things He gifts us for. And in most cases, He gifts us for the benefit of others. When we put that in the context of finishing well, we are therefore faithful to God and use whatever gifts He gives us for the benefit of those we leave behind. Paul invests in Timothy, and he instructs Timothy to keep preaching the gospel and leading the people of God.

And all throughout, as we are faithful to God and use our gifts for those who will follow us, we maintain our focus on the truth of Christ. We avoid quarreling over useless things. We sift false teachings from true. We cleanse ourselves from what Paul refers to as common articles of wood and clay so that the articles for special use, the gold and silver, are left behind for holy purposes. We flee evil desires and call on the Lord with a pure heart instead. We continue in the Scriptures so that we may be servants of God, thoroughly equipped for every good work. We invest in the body of Christ and in those who are not yet in the body of Christ but could be if we shared the message with them. And we suffer unashamedly, if we must, for the gospel of Christ which gives us hope of resurrection.

Jesus preached a parable about some people who didn’t finish terribly well. They finished well enough to get their reward, I suppose, but not without some grumbling. The story is about a landowner who hires some workers for his vineyard, promising to pay them what’s fair. He goes back to the marketplace every couple of hours throughout the day, hiring more and more workers each time. At the end of the day, he pays them all the same wage, the wage for a full day’s work, regardless of whether they worked ten hours or one. The ones who had worked the longest started grumbling, even though they got a fair wage for a day’s work and that was what they had agreed to. They’d worked hard all day for the landowner, but in the end we remember them as grumblers, not hard workers, because they shifted their focus onto comparing their reward with that of others. They didn’t understand the generosity of the landowner and the economics of God’s kingdom, and their hard work gave way to envy.

It’s the same thing Paul tells Timothy about. It’s that shift of focus that kills a good ending. It’s taking our eyes off the work of God and worrying about things other than living in His vineyard. It’s adding to or subtracting from His call upon us. It’s infusing God’s truth with our own notions and desires for what we think His truth ought to be. And when that happens, our course ever so slightly starts going askew, until in the end we have fallen far short of the finish line.

The good news is that it's never too late to finish well. Set a course of faithfulness, trusting in God to remain faithful to us. Use your gifts faithfully. Use your actions and your words and your life to preach the gospel of Christ to those who will follow you. Finish well.



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