

Paul, Timothy and Troubled Times Part 11

As we continue our series we are focused on Paul's declaration, **"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."** **2 Timothy 4:7**. We discussed last Sunday who and what Paul and all of us are fighting against: specifically, the world, the flesh and the devil. This morning I want to examine Paul's next declaration, "I have finished the race." The King James Version reads, **"I have finished my course."**

On more than one occasion Paul uses athletic endeavors as a metaphor in his letters. He stated earlier in chapter 2 that "if anyone competes as an athlete he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules." In 1 Corinthians Paul admonishes us, **"Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."** **1 Corinthians 9:24-25**

It seems at this point Paul is thinking of his life as a race he's run, a course he's completed. Perhaps Paul was thinking of an obstacle course since life has its' share of obstacles and challenges. All of us have a course, a race to run. It will be challenging. It's constant. There will be enemies to fight, obstacles to face, we'll get tired, fatigued, discouraged, but we have a race to run. Run in such a way as to get the prize and complete the course.

The ancient Isthmian Games were held in Corinth. When Paul writes to the church there about running or boxing, they understood his reference. They knew what he meant about those who compete must go into strict training. In order to run our race, to complete the course God has for us, it will require discipline. We can't finish it any other way. You'll have to say no to some things and yes to others and the choices won't always be easy or well received by others. There'll be opportunities to quit, to give up, to give in. It will require perseverance. We will have to endure hardship. We will have to push through injuries. We will run with shin splints, with blisters on our feet, with back pain, in good weather and bad. We will run alone, we will keep running when people reject us, wound us, injure and offend us. We will run when we don't feel like it, when we just don't want to, but we will keep running because we have a course to complete. Olympic athletes train and run for a crown that won't last, we do it to please Jesus, to finish our course and to receive that victor's crown that Jesus himself will present to us when we complete the course. Keep going!

We will have to run with courage because the course will lead through some dark places, difficult places, enemy territory, even through the valley of the shadow of death. Keep running. Run in such a way as to win. It will require faith. We will run when we aren't sure of the path, unsure of what's ahead, but we keep running because Jesus said "go this way. I'll make sure there is enough light for the next step. Run in faith." We will run with confidence because the one who called us has been this way before. He knows the way. Don't stop. Keep running.

Paul ran and completed the race, but I want you to remember something about his race, about his course. **The course he completed wasn't the course he began.** Paul had a sudden and dramatic course change, a course correction. **It's not too late for a course correction!** If you have gps in your car you may be familiar with this word: Recalculating! It's not too late,

Paul said "I finished the course" but remember the course he started. He told the church at Philippi about the course he had begun as he described himself. **"Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless." Philippians 3:5-6**

Paul tells us in Acts that he started his course as a Pharisee, part of the "strictest sect" of Judaism. He was the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6) and lived as a Pharisee (Acts 26:5). After Jesus' death and resurrection and the empowerment of Pentecost, the followers of Jesus preached the message of salvation and forgiveness through faith in Jesus and more and more people believed. Convinced that Jesus was a blasphemer and a charlatan who had deceived people and now his followers were deceiving people, claiming Jesus to be the Messiah and that he had risen from the dead, Paul joined the High Priests and others in trying to stop the spread of this new faith. In his address to King Agrippa, Paul tells him, **"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."** Acts 26:9-11

It was on one of those journeys to a foreign city, Damascus in Syria, that the course of Paul's life changed, dramatically, eternally. Luke tells us Paul was on his way with letters to the synagogues from the chief priests, authorizing him to arrest anyone who belonged to "the Way",

whether male or female and take them as prisoners back to Jerusalem. Luke writes, **“As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. “Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do.” Acts 9:3-6**

Talk about re-calculating. A dramatic course change in the middle of the course. Paul, then called Saul, knew what he was doing, knew where he was going as a persecutor of the church. He had a plan, a course laid out for himself. He was going to stamp out this Christian heresy and save Judaism, but God had another plan, another course for him to run.

Paul literally didn't see this course change coming because when he got up from the ground, he couldn't see anything. He was blind. He couldn't run that old course anymore because he couldn't see it. His companions led him into the city and for three days he was blind. He didn't eat or drink, just fasting and praying, waiting to hear from God, waiting to figure out what's next and where to from here on this new course. While Paul was waiting in darkness, praying for direction, the Lord spoke to a follower of Jesus living in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord told him to **“Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.’ ‘Lord,’ Ananias answered, ‘I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” Acts 9:11-14** Word had gotten out about Paul's mission. You have to appreciate the boldness of Ananias, feeling like he needed to keep the Lord informed on what was happening in town, in case he didn't know. “Maybe you hadn't heard, Lord.” Interesting how we presume to know more than God does at times. **“But the Lord said to Ananias, ‘Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.’” Acts 9:15-16**

Ananias did as he was instructed. He went to the house and found Saul just as the Lord had said. I love that Ananias refers to this former persecutor of the church as brother. **“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Immediately something**

like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized and after taking some food, he regained his strength." Acts 9:17-19

From a persecutor of the church, an enemy of Jesus, with his course all planned out, Saul begins a new course as Paul, a baptized believer, a follower of Jesus. Jesus had a new course, a new plan for Paul, a new race to run. Luke says, **"At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God."** Acts 9:20 Talk about a change in direction, a change in course. He went from being a persecutor to himself being persecuted. He came with orders to arrest people and possibly have people executed for following Jesus and now he is being pursued and people are trying to kill him for the same reason. (Acts 9:20-30).

What made the difference? What caused the course change? You already know, it was an encounter with Jesus. Saul met Jesus on that road and his course was forever altered. What followed was a lifetime of living for Jesus, sacrificing everything for Jesus. Serving Jesus became the passion and purpose of Paul's life. He discovered that although there may be a course we thought we should pursue, God has a better plan if we will say yes to him. God's got a good plan for you. It's a course that leads to peace and joy and it begins with meeting Jesus and having an encounter with him. If you'll ask him to save you and forgive your sins, if you'll surrender your heart and life to him, he will change everything. You can start running a new course for your life, running His course this time. Running with new purpose and a new destination! Follow him, follow the course the Lord has planned for you. Paul wrote, **"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."** Ephesians 2:10 Listen, God has a plan and a purpose for you, a course you are to run and complete. He prepared it in advance. Choose Jesus and follow his course. You won't regret it. You have an opportunity today to change course, just as Paul did.

"I'm sure God has a plan and I was following it once but I messed up. I got off course and now I'm a long way away from what God planned for me. I don't even know how to get back on course. I don't think I've got another chance." Yep, you're right, God only gives us one chance and if we mess that up, that's it. You know that's not right. God can redeem you and your past and give you another chance. It's not too late for you. You can change course. It was Paul who told us God was able to cause all things to work together for our good. Even if we've failed and lost our way, God can take the brokenness and the mistakes of the past and work them for our good, enabling us to complete the course he has laid out for us. Recalculating.

We don't have time to recount the stories in the bible or the personal stories we know of people who started the course and messed up, who failed, who got caught up in sin, but they changed course, they had an encounter with Jesus and began a new course. Hear me again, **Your course can change!** By his grace your course can change. Your destiny can change. The destiny of your family can change. It doesn't matter your choices in the past, what someone said or did, God's grace is a greater determiner of destiny than nature or nurture, than heredity or environment. I don't care who your daddy was, what your mother did, what circumstances you came out of or where you thought you were headed, you can change course today and begin to follow Jesus and run a new course. You may have had a rocky start on that old course you were running, but like Paul you can run a new course with Jesus and you can finish strong!

Paul finished the race. In Acts 20, he is saying good bye to the church in Ephesus. Paul knows trouble is ahead but he is determined to complete the race. He tells them, **“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.” Acts 20:22-24**

Think of that change in Paul's course. From a persecutor bent on seeing Christians imprisoned and executed and now, Paul is preparing to lay down his life for Jesus. All that mattered was pleasing Jesus, serving him, finishing the race, completing the course. How about you? Isn't it time for you to change course, to begin to follow Jesus, to run the race he has laid out for you? Perhaps you got off track, but there is still time and opportunity to change course. It's not too late. It's not too late for you to do, with the Lord's help, what is necessary for you to finish the race and to finish strong! Allow the Holy Spirit to recalculate your course and then let's run the race and complete the course. The choice is yours!