

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 12: Finishing the Race: The Apostle's Final Charge and Enduring Gospel

2 Timothy 4:1–8; Romans 1:16–17

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This final lesson brings Paul to the end of his race, around A.D. 67, writing his last letter from a Roman prison as he faced execution under Nero. It pairs his final charge to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4 with the great statement of the gospel he had written years earlier in Romans 1. The pairing is deliberate and fitting for the close of the study: at the end of his life Paul's message had not changed; the gospel that turned a persecutor into a preacher was the same gospel he died proclaiming. The historical poignancy is great: an aged, abandoned prisoner, confident not in his circumstances but in the faithfulness of God and the certainty of his hope.

The doctrinal themes draw the whole study to a climax. Paul charges that the word be faithfully preached against the perennial appetite for 'itching ears.' He presents the Christian life as a fight to be fought and a race to be finished, underscoring the perseverance the study has stressed throughout. He points to the crown of righteousness, a reward of grace for all who love Christ's appearing, and he holds out the believer's hope in the return of the Lord. The heaviest doctrinal block (Question 9) returns to Romans 1:17, 'the righteous shall live by faith,' to summarize the enduring gospel: salvation by grace through an obedient, persevering faith, guarding against both earning salvation by works and emptying faith of obedience. This is the gospel the whole study has traced in Paul's life.

This lesson aims at a faithful finish. Press students to examine whether they crave the word that corrects them or only the voices that flatter them; whether they are running the race or coasting; whether they truly love Christ's appearing. As the study ends, help them see their own lives as a race to be finished and the gospel as the power that both saves and keeps them. Use the sweep of Paul's life, from the coats at Stephen's stoning to the crown laid up in heaven, to call every student to keep the faith to the end and to carry forward one truth from his journey. Send them home unashamed of the gospel and resolved to finish well.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul charged Timothy, "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season," warning that people would gather teachers "to suit their own passions" and turn from truth to myths (2 Timothy 4:2–4). Why is the faithful preaching and teaching of God's word so essential, and what does the danger of 'itching ears' reveal about the human heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Note the solemnity of the charge. Paul issues it 'in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead.' Preaching the word is not one ministry option among many; it is the central, sacred task, because the word of God is how He speaks, saves, and sanctifies His people. To preach the word is to deliver God's own message rather than human opinion.

Explain 'in season and out of season.' Timothy is to be ready whether the message is welcome or unwelcome, convenient or costly, applauded or resisted. Faithfulness is not measured by popularity. The four verbs, reprove, rebuke, exhort, and the manner, 'with complete patience and teaching,' show that faithful ministry both confronts and encourages, always grounded in instruction from the word.

Diagnose 'itching ears.' Paul describes people who 'will not endure sound teaching' but 'accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.' This reveals a deep tendency of the fallen heart: we prefer to be soothed rather than corrected, and we will seek out voices that tell us what we want to hear. The danger is not merely bad teachers but the appetite that creates a market for them.

Apply it to the church and the student. A faithful church and a faithful Christian must want the word that corrects as well as comforts, and must support preaching that is true even when it is hard. Help students see that the cure for itching ears is a heart that loves the truth more than its own preferences.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The faithful preaching of the word as the central, sacred task (2 Timothy 4:2)
- Faithfulness measured by truth, not popularity (in season and out of season)
- 'Itching ears' as the heart's preference for comfort over correction
- The appetite for flattering teaching as a spiritual danger

Discussion Prompts

- Why is faithful preaching of the word so essential?
- What does the appetite for 'itching ears' reveal about us?
- How can a church and a Christian guard against it?

Question 2

Student Question:

It is easy to want teaching that comforts and flatters rather than corrects. Do you genuinely seek out the word that challenges and reshapes you, or do you gravitate toward voices that simply confirm what you already want to believe? How do you respond when Scripture rebukes you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns the warning about itching ears inward. In an age of endless content, we can curate a steady diet of voices that only confirm our existing views and never challenge us. The question is whether we actually want to be corrected by God or only reassured by Him.

Help students notice their patterns. Which teachers, books, and voices do they gravitate toward, and why? Do they ever sit under teaching that confronts their preferred sins and assumptions, or only what flatters? An honest look often reveals a quiet preference for comfort over truth.

Move toward a teachable heart. The mark of spiritual maturity is welcoming the word that rebukes us, receiving correction as a gift rather than an insult (Proverbs 9:8–9). Encourage each student to invite, rather than avoid, the parts of Scripture and the faithful voices that challenge them, and to respond to rebuke this week with humility rather than defensiveness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to curate only comforting, confirming voices
- Welcoming correction as a gift of love (Proverbs 9:8–9)
- A teachable heart as a mark of maturity
- Responding to rebuke with humility rather than defensiveness

Discussion Prompts

- Do you seek out teaching that challenges or only that comforts?
- How do you respond when Scripture rebukes you?
- What would a more teachable heart look like for you?

Question 3

Student Question:

Looking back over his life, Paul wrote, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). What does it tell us that the Christian life is pictured as a fight to be fought and a race to be finished, and why is faithful endurance to the end so important?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Examine Paul’s three images. A ‘good fight’ pictures the Christian life as a struggle requiring effort, courage, and resistance against real opposition. A ‘race’ to be ‘finished’ pictures it as a course with a starting line and a finish line, demanding endurance over the long haul. ‘Kept the faith’ pictures it as a trust to be guarded and held to the end. None of these images suggests a passive, automatic, or guaranteed-without-effort journey.

Stress the importance of finishing, not merely starting. Paul does not boast that he began well or ran fast, but that he finished and kept the faith. Throughout his letters he warns that the race must be completed; he disciplined himself 'lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified' (1 Corinthians 9:27). A race is not won at the start but at the finish line.

Connect this to the study's recurring theme of perseverance. We have seen Paul warn the Ephesian elders that disciples could be drawn away, and now we see him model the alternative: a faith kept to the very end. Endurance is essential because the Christian life is a lifelong course, and the crown is promised to those who finish, not merely to those who begin (Revelation 2:10).

Apply it without anxiety. This is not a call to earn salvation by effort, but to persevere in the grace we have received, by God's power. Help students see their lives as a race in progress, calling for endurance, vigilance, and dependence on God, with the finish line and the crown in view.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Christian life as a fight, a race, and a trust to be kept (2 Timothy 4:7)
- The importance of finishing, not merely starting (1 Corinthians 9:27)
- Perseverance to the end as essential, not optional (Revelation 2:10)
- Endurance in grace by God's power, not salvation earned by effort

Discussion Prompts

- What do the images of a fight and a race teach about the Christian life?
- Why is finishing, not just starting, what matters?
- How does this connect to the call to persevere?

Question 4

Student Question:

The Christian life is a race to be finished, not merely begun. Are you running with endurance, or have you begun to coast, drift, or grow weary? What specifically threatens your finishing well, and what would it look like to run hard again?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the race imagery into the student's present. Many believers start well but gradually slow to a coast, going through the motions, drifting on old momentum, or growing weary in well-doing. The danger is rarely a dramatic renunciation; it is a quiet fading of zeal and watchfulness.

Help students name what threatens their endurance. For some it is discouragement or weariness; for others, busyness, comfort, a besetting sin, a cooling love, or disappointment with

God or His people. Naming the specific threat is the first step to addressing it. The writer of Hebrews calls us to 'lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely' (Hebrews 12:1).

Move toward running hard again. Encourage each student to identify one concrete way to renew their pace, a discipline restored, a sin laid aside, a renewed dependence on God, a recommitment to the body, and to fix their eyes on Jesus, 'the founder and perfecter of our faith' (Hebrews 12:2), who supplies the strength to finish.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of coasting, drifting, and growing weary
- Laying aside the weights and sins that hinder (Hebrews 12:1)
- Naming the specific threats to finishing well
- Renewed endurance by looking to Jesus (Hebrews 12:2)

Discussion Prompts

- Are you running with endurance or beginning to coast?
- What specifically threatens your finishing well?
- What would it look like to run hard again?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul looked forward to “the crown of righteousness” reserved not only for him but “to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8). What is this crown, why is it given by grace rather than earned as a wage, and what does it mean to be among those who ‘love his appearing’?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Describe the crown. In Paul's world, the victor's crown was a wreath given to the one who won the race or the contest. Paul borrows the image for the reward awaiting the faithful: a 'crown of righteousness,' the fullness of righteousness and glory that God will grant on 'that Day.' It is the hope that steadied him as the executioner's sword drew near.

Clarify that it is grace, not merit. Paul does not present the crown as wages he earned by his impressive service, as if God owed him. It is 'the Lord, the righteous judge,' who 'will award' it, a gift of grace to those who belong to Him, consistent with the whole gospel Paul preached. The same apostle who said we are saved by grace and not by works (Ephesians 2:8–9) here receives a crown by grace, not as a debt God must pay.

Hold reward and grace together. Scripture can speak both of salvation as a free gift and of rewards for faithfulness, without contradiction, because even our faithfulness is enabled by

grace, and the reward itself is gracious. The crown is not Paul congratulating himself but God crowning His own grace at work in a faithful life.

Explain ‘all who have loved his appearing.’ The crown is not for Paul alone or for apostles only, but for all who long for Christ’s return, who love Him and look for Him. To love His appearing is to have one’s heart set on Christ and His coming, living now in eager hope of seeing Him. This love is the mark of those who will receive the crown.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The crown of righteousness as the believer’s gracious reward and hope
- Reward given by grace, not earned as a wage (Ephesians 2:8–9)
- Salvation and reward both flowing from grace, without contradiction
- Loving Christ’s appearing as the mark of the faithful (Titus 2:13)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the crown of righteousness, and who receives it?
- Why is it given by grace rather than earned?
- What does it mean to ‘love his appearing’?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul lived and died longing for the return of his Lord. Do you genuinely love the appearing of Christ, looking forward to it with hope, or has the thought of His return faded into the background of your life? How would living with eternity in view change your priorities this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the hope of Christ’s appearing into the student’s affections. For Paul, the return of Christ was not a distant abstraction but a beloved hope that shaped how he lived and faced death. For many of us, by contrast, the thought of His coming has faded into the background, crowded out by the urgent and the temporal.

Help students examine their hope honestly. Do they truly long to see Christ, or has His appearing become a doctrine they affirm but rarely desire? Loving His appearing means our hearts are genuinely set on Him and on the day we will see Him face to face (1 John 3:2–3).

Move toward living with eternity in view. Ask students how their priorities, their use of time and money, their handling of trials, their treatment of people, would shift if they lived this week in eager expectation of Christ’s return. The hope of His appearing is meant to purify and motivate us now, not merely to comfort us later. Encourage one concrete change that reflects a heart set on that Day.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Loving Christ's appearing as a present, shaping hope (Titus 2:13)
- The purifying effect of the hope of seeing Christ (1 John 3:2–3)
- Living with eternity in view, reordering present priorities
- Recovering a faded hope into a living longing

Discussion Prompts

- Do you genuinely love and long for Christ's appearing?
- Has His return faded into the background of your life?
- How would living with eternity in view change this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Writing to the Romans, Paul declared, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). What does it mean that the gospel is the 'power of God for salvation,' and why was Paul so unashamed of it through every trial?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Define the claim. The gospel is not merely good advice or a hopeful message; it is 'the power of God for salvation.' The same God who spoke creation into being puts His saving power to work through the gospel, actually rescuing and transforming those who believe. The message itself carries divine power; it does what no human wisdom or effort can do.

Note its scope: 'to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.' The gospel is universal in its reach, breaking every barrier of ethnicity and background, available to all who believe. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, had given his life to carrying this universal gospel to the nations, exactly as we have traced through this study.

Explain Paul's lack of shame. Paul had been beaten, imprisoned, mocked by philosophers, and now faced execution for this message, yet he was 'not ashamed.' Why? Because he knew its power and had seen it save, beginning with himself. A man who had watched the gospel turn a persecutor into a preacher could never be embarrassed by it. Its power answered every reason for shame.

Apply it to the believer's confidence. We are tempted to be ashamed of the gospel when it seems foolish or unpopular, but Paul reminds us it is the very power of God. Help students recover confidence in the gospel itself, not in their eloquence or the culture's approval, so that they too can be unashamed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel as the very power of God to save and transform (Romans 1:16)
- The universal scope of the gospel, for all who believe
- Confidence grounded in the gospel's power, not human approval
- Paul unashamed because he had seen and felt the gospel's power

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the gospel is the 'power of God for salvation'?
- Why was Paul so unashamed of it through every trial?
- How does the gospel's power free us from shame?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul proclaimed the gospel before mobs, magistrates, and kings without shame. Where are you most tempted to be ashamed of the gospel or to keep quiet about it, and how does remembering that it is 'the power of God for salvation' free you to speak?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns Paul's confidence into self-examination. Most of us are not ashamed of the gospel in church; we grow quiet in other settings, the workplace, the campus, the family gathering, the circle of friends who would find our faith strange. Naming the specific setting where we shrink back is the first step toward courage.

Help students locate the root of their shame. Often it is the fear of seeming foolish, intolerant, or out of step with the culture. Paul felt that pressure too, the gospel was 'folly to the Greeks,' yet he was unashamed because he knew its power. Our shame usually grows when we forget what the gospel actually is.

Move toward freedom. Remembering that the gospel is 'the power of God for salvation' shifts the weight off our shoulders; we are not responsible to make it persuasive, only to share it faithfully, trusting its power. Encourage each student to identify one setting where they will speak or live more openly for Christ this week, leaning on the power of the message rather than their own.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming the settings where we are tempted to shame or silence
- The fear of man and cultural pressure behind our shame (Mark 8:38)
- Confidence restored by remembering the gospel's power
- Faithful witness that trusts the message, not our eloquence

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to be ashamed of the gospel?
- What lies at the root of that shame?
- How does the gospel's power free you to speak?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul summed up the heart of the gospel he preached and wrote: "In it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith'" (Romans 1:17). Drawing on the whole of Paul's life and this study, what is the enduring gospel he proclaimed, how does 'the righteous shall live by faith' describe a faith that not only receives Christ but lives faithfully to the end, and how does this guard us from both earning salvation by works and emptying faith of obedience?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson and the capstone of the entire study, so give it room. Begin by drawing the whole arc together. The gospel Paul died proclaiming is the same gospel that stopped him on the Damascus road and the same gospel he had written to the Romans years before. It is the message that 'the righteousness of God,' the right standing with God that we cannot manufacture, is revealed and given in the gospel and received by faith. Salvation is God's gift, grounded in the death and resurrection of Christ, not in our own merit.

Unfold 'from faith for faith.' The phrase emphasizes that from start to finish the Christian life is a matter of faith; it begins in faith and continues in faith. This is why Paul quotes Habakkuk: 'The righteous shall live by faith.' The one who is justified by faith then lives by faith, a faith that is not a single past act but an ongoing, life-defining trust in and obedience to God. Faith is the door we enter and the path we walk.

Show that this describes the faith we have seen throughout the study. It is not a bare mental assent that saves at a point and then makes no difference. It is the obedient faith of the Damascus road, where Saul believed and was baptized to wash away his sins; the faith of the Philippian jailer, who believed and was baptized that very hour; the faith defended at the Jerusalem council, received by grace and not earned by law; the faith that perseveres, keeps the race, and finishes well. 'The righteous shall live by faith' gathers all of this into one phrase: a faith that receives Christ on His terms and then lives faithfully to the end.

Draw the two guardrails explicitly, since this verse has been pulled both ways. On one side, 'the righteousness of God' is a gift received by faith, not a wage earned by works of the law or human merit; this guards against the legalism Paul fought his whole life, and against any boasting in our own record (Romans 3:27–28; Ephesians 2:8–9). On the other side, 'the righteous shall live by faith' describes a faith that obeys and endures, not a bare 'faith only' that

omits repentance, confession, baptism, and a faithful life; this guards against emptying faith of the obedience that has marked every conversion and every charge in this study (James 2:24; Romans 6:3–4). The gospel runs straight between these two ditches: salvation by grace, through an obedient, persevering faith.

Land the whole study here. We began with Saul the persecutor, trusting his own pedigree and law-keeping, and we end with Paul the aged prisoner, resting wholly on the grace of Christ and a faith kept to the end. The change in him is the change the gospel still works. Help students see that the same enduring gospel, the power of God for salvation, received by an obedient faith and lived out to the finish line, is the message that can save them, keep them, and one day crown them. Send them out trusting it, living it, and unashamed of it, as Paul was to his last breath.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The enduring gospel: God’s righteousness revealed and received by faith in Christ (Romans 1:17)
- ‘From faith for faith’: the Christian life begun and continued in faith
- ‘The righteous shall live by faith’ as a faith that receives Christ and lives faithfully to the end
- Salvation by grace, not earned by works of the law or merit (Romans 3:27–28; Ephesians 2:8–9)
- Saving faith as an obedient faith, not a bare ‘faith only’ (James 2:24; Romans 6:3–4)
- The gospel running between legalism and license: grace through an obedient, persevering faith
- The whole arc of Paul’s life as the gospel’s transforming power on display

Discussion Prompts

- What is the enduring gospel Paul preached and wrote?
- How does ‘the righteous shall live by faith’ describe a faith that lives to the end?
- How does this guard against both earning salvation and emptying faith of obedience?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole of Paul’s story, from Saul the persecutor breathing threats, to the road to Damascus, to the apostle who finished his race and kept the faith. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using Paul’s life, and this study, to form you, and what one truth from his journey you most want to carry forward and live by.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone closes not only the lesson but the entire study, so let it gather the whole journey. Walk briefly back through the arc: the proud persecutor, the grace that stopped him, the

transformed preacher, the missionary to the nations, the defender of grace, the sufferer sustained by sufficient grace, the shepherd, the witness before kings, the joyful prisoner, and finally the aged saint finishing his race. The same grace that did all of this is at work in your students.

Ask for one specific, personal response. Resist generalities. Invite each student to name the single truth from Paul's life that has most gripped them, the wonder of grace, the call to obedient faith, the cost of discipleship, the sufficiency of grace in suffering, the centrality of the resurrection, the supremacy of Christ, the need to finish well, and to name one concrete way they will carry it forward.

Close with hope and a charge. The story that began with coats laid at a young persecutor's feet ended with a crown laid up in heaven, and the same Lord who transformed Saul into Paul is still turning sinners into saints and calling His people to finish faithfully. Send students out marveling at grace, resting in the enduring gospel, and resolved, like Paul, to fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The whole arc of Paul's life as a testimony to transforming grace
- Naming one specific, personal truth to carry forward
- The call to finish the race and keep the faith
- Marveling at the grace that turns persecutors into preachers

Discussion Prompts

- Looking across Paul's whole story, what has gripped you most?
- What one truth do you most want to carry forward and live by?
- What will it look like for you to finish your own race faithfully?