

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher

Lesson 12: Finishing the Race: The Apostle's Final Charge and Enduring Gospel -- 2 Timothy 4:1–8; Romans 1:16–17

This is the last letter we have from Paul, and he knows it. He is not under house arrest in a rented room this time; he is in a cold Roman dungeon, abandoned by many, awaiting execution under Nero. He asks Timothy to bring his cloak before winter and the parchments he left behind. An old soldier of Christ, weary and alone, is writing to his dearest son in the faith, and he wants to leave him with the things that matter most. There is no self-pity in these lines, only urgency, affection, and a torch being passed.

His charge to Timothy is solemn and clear: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” And he warns him why it matters so much: a time is coming, is already here, when people “will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,” turning away from the truth to wander off into myths. So Timothy must hold the line: “be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”

Then Paul looks back over his own life, and what he writes has steadied dying saints ever since. “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” There it is, the whole journey in a single breath. The man who began as Saul the persecutor, breathing threats and murder, is now Paul the aged prisoner, able to say he kept the faith to the end. And he looks ahead with confidence: “Henceforth 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.”

At the center of it all, from his first great letter to his last breath, stood one unchanging message, the gospel he was never ashamed of. He had written it to the Romans years before, and he died believing every word: “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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” This final lesson stands at the end of Paul’s race and asks what it means to finish faithfully, and it returns to the enduring gospel that turned a persecutor into a preacher, the same gospel that can save and keep us to the end.

Group Discussion: At the end of his life Paul could say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). What would it take for you to be able to say those words at the end of your life, and what most threatens to keep you from finishing well?

Personal Reflection: Paul was “not ashamed of the gospel” (Romans 1:16), even facing execution for it. Is there a setting or relationship where you have been quietly ashamed of the gospel, or at least reluctant to be known by it? What would it mean to share Paul’s unashamed confidence?

Read 2 Timothy 4:1–8; Romans 1:16–17

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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’?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, running the race to win and disciplining the body; Hebrews 12:1–2, running with endurance, looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith; Philippians 3:12–14, pressing on toward the goal for the prize; 2 Timothy 1:8–12, not being ashamed of the testimony and guarding the deposit; Habakkuk 2:4, the righteous shall live by his faith