



2 Timothy 4:1-8
The Story
Paul's Final Daysⁱ

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This is our next-to-last Sunday in this series called “The Story.” It’s been a chronological walk through Scripture focusing on the big picture narrative of the story of the Bible: Creation, God’s special relationship with humanity, the formation of the nation of Israel...their ups and downs...the promise of a coming king in the lineage of David whose Kingdom would be established forever...the fulfillment of that promise and a bunch of others in Jesus Christ, but then he is unexpectedly crucified, more unexpectedly raised to life, and all of a sudden his band of followers began to grow and spread across the Mediterranean world as they kept testifying that they Jesus really was raised from the dead. And that becomes the testimony that they repeat over and over, that they dedicate their lives to, and are willing to die for that message as they keep proclaiming that it really is true.

And there are *many* of them that we read about in Acts, and who are mentioned in many of the letters in the New Testament. For instance: The disciples whom we read about in the Gospels such as Peter, John, the two James, Philip, Andrew, and so forth and are also mentioned in Acts, plus in Acts and the rest of the NT we read about Silas, Lydia, Stephen, Barnabas, Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos, Aristarcus, Secundus, Tychicus, Trophimus, Timothy, Andronicas, Junia, Apelles, Julia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Rufus, Mark, Persis, Nereus, Olympas, Jason, Sosipater, Tertius, Gaius, Epaphroditus, Epaphras, Euodia, Syntyche, Luke, Onesimus, Titus, Justus, Demas, Claudia, Eubulus, Lois, Linus, Lucy, Charlie Brown and Snoopy. Ok...not the last three – Linus was legit – he’s mentioned at the end of 2 Timothy – but not the three that followed. Those are many (half?) of the people named in Acts and in the letters of the New Testament who helped lead churches, who ministered in their communities, who housed Paul or his co-workers when they visited their towns, who were particularly encouraging, and so forth. There are others who are named as well, and a whole bunch more who are unnamed, but were part of the churches in the different communities.

So as much as we focus on Paul, and a couple other key folks, in the

birth of the church: it was a movement that encompassed a lot of people, and the number of them kept growing and growing. Some of them were eyewitnesses who saw Jesus after the resurrection, but many of these people came to faith because of the testimony of those eyewitnesses.

And I think there's something for us to learn and be encouraged by in all of this, and that is that: **God can work through any of us to have an impact on the Church – whether our name is well known or not.** You don't need to be Paul, or Billy Graham, or Mother Theresa, or Earl Palmer (well-known, former head pastor at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle). There are countless people whose names we will never know who have had a profound impact on the Kingdom of God. They have touched people's lives and influenced them toward Christ. And probably many of us here this morning have touched at least a few people's lives and influenced them for Christ – in our homes, here in church, out in the community, and so forth. So all these people, whether their names are in the Bible or not, started proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus, and the Church began to grow.

Now, Paul *did* become the most famous proponent of that message after initially being the biggest challenger to that message and persecuting Christians, and violently opposing them. He did a complete about-face before he started preaching Christ crucified and resurrected. But then he helped start churches in a number of cities, oftentimes spending several months or even a couple years to help get things started, evangelize, teach the faith, and then equip leaders to take his place once he moved on. He kept in touch with many of those churches through letters, and the back and forth travels of some of his missionary companions, or visits to him by people from these churches. The book of Acts, which we were in the last couple weeks, is like a biography about the spread of the church, and much of it focuses on Paul's travels and ministry. We also have many (all?) of the letters that he wrote, and they comprise a good chunk of the New Testament: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon are the Pauline letters. The other NT letters are written by other people at about the same time.

Most of the NT letters are written in response to questions the churches have,

where a church is seeking guidance in regards to doctrinal things, or Christian living and leadership issues, conflict that they're having (Jews and Gentiles was a common one) and they want input to bring resolution, and so forth. Most of the New Testament letters – whether Paul's or someone else's – are written to specific churches, while others were intended to be circulated among the churches in a given region, while others were written to individuals.

And this morning's passage is one snippet from one of Paul's letters – 2 Timothy. Scholars are in general agreement that this was probably the last letter that Paul wrote. He says earlier in chapter 2, **“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal” (2 Timothy 2:8-9)**. When we look at the events in Acts and who the government officials were that Paul stood before when he was on trial, we can deduce that Paul was imprisoned in Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero. Nero was a complete nut-job who reigned as Emperor from 54-68 A.D.

As one author writes: **“One of the most despicable manifestations of human flesh ever to disgrace this planet was Nero Claudius Caesar.”**ⁱⁱ (At least he's clear on what he thinks about Nero, right?). For example: In 64 A.D., a fire raged through Rome for over a week that burned down 70% of the city. In order to squelch a rumor (scholarly debate about whether the rumor was actually fact) that he intentionally set the fire so he could build a city with more grandeur, Nero made it his mission to say that it was actually Christians who set the fire, and he began persecuting them viciously (imprisoned, executed). You can read about it in the writings of Tacitus, a Roman historian who lived from 60 A.D. to 120 A.D. Well, it was this Nero who then kept Paul in house arrest for 2 ½ years until his trial and Paul most likely died as a martyr in about 66 or 67 A.D. as a part of Nero's campaign against Christians. So this letter was almost certainly written in about 65 A.D., plus or minus a year.

And in this letter to his co-worker and apprentice in the faith, Timothy, Paul has a couple of main points in it, that are crystallized for us in this passage.

First, he gives Timothy some words of instruction about living out his faith and shepherding the church in Ephesus. He tells him in verse two, “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.” And then after some cautionary words about the culture around them, he continues in verse 5, “Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge (fully carry out) all the duties of your ministry.”

Now, some of the themes here, we talked about last week: such as preaching the Word and this idea of being prepared – which we should probably take to be connected to the preaching. Be prepared to talk about your faith and point people to Jesus. This also connects very directly to the point in verse 5 about doing the work of an evangelist.

Then he also says to correct, rebuke and encourage others, and to do all of this with great patience and careful instruction. You see: **Passing on the Christian faith is not something that happens quickly or accidentally.** It takes patience; it takes careful instruction, it takes preparation, and more. That’s why (and all churches, really) we have opportunities to grow in both understanding of the faith and opportunities to live it out. We have Sermons, Discipleship classes, Bible studies, small groups, opportunities to serve the community, and opportunities to teach the faith to our peers and to the younger generations. It’s why parents teach their kids at home about the love of God, about Jesus, about what it means to be a Christian. These are all opportunities to live out what Paul admonishes and encourages Timothy to do, and now by extension us, too.

In a nutshell I would say that he is encouraging Timothy in the work of discipling others. Let’s be encouraged in our own work of discipling others, recognizing that this takes different forms, but all of it in some way instructs others, and that it can be done with great patience. So that’s one thing that Paul communicates in here.

The second thing to highlight here is the way in which Paul acknowledges that the end of his life is near, and the reflections he has on his ministry. He writes, **“For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the**

time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:6-7). Paul is not boasting or bragging. Paul certainly confesses his faults and shortcomings enough in various points in his letters, and says the only thing he boasts in is Jesus Christ crucified (Galatians 6:14, 1 Corinthians 1:31), for us to believe that he’s not intending this as a boastful statement. This is just a look back, kind of a memoir, knowing that the end is near, wanting to believe that he’s done something good and lived as God has called him to...that he’s finished the race of life that God laid out for him as well as he possibly could.

Don’t we all want that, really? Paul is the epitome of the sports phrase, **“It’s not how you start that matters, but how you finish.”** Paul did not start his relationship with Jesus very well. But he finished about as strongly as he possibly could.

In the 1972 Munich Summer Olympics, Dave Wottle, a middle-distance runner for the U.S., ran a race that perfectly embodies this. In an interview after the race he shared that he got off to a slow start because of butterflies and the jitters. He just didn’t run the race he had planned, though the tv announcers speculated on other possibilities for why he started so slowly. But there was nothing intentional about his start. There wasn’t really anything intentional about him even *being* in this race. He normally ran longer distances, but he decided to try running 800 meter races in order to work on his speed. So the fact that he was even in the Olympics in this event was almost an accident. His finish, on the other hand was anything but accidental. Watch this.... **Video Clip Here** (If you’re reading this online, you can watch at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=120Bi0vhRPg>.)

Dave Wottle fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. But the reward at the end of the race of life isn’t a medal that gets hung around your neck by some International Olympic Committee Member who probably took bribes in his job. ☺ The reward is a “crown of righteousness” that the Lord Jesus, the flawless sacrificial lamb who conquered the grave...it’s a crown that he himself will give – not only for Paul, but “for all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8).

And it's not that we run the race well in order to earn that crown. **The crown is already ours through faith in Jesus and the work he's done on the cross.** And so with hearts filled with gratitude, we run with a desire to live Christ-like lives...we respond to what he's done for us by living in a way that honors Jesus through what Paul writes: preaching the Word, being prepared in season and out of season, correcting, rebuking, encouraging with great patience and careful instruction...enduring hardship, doing the work of an evangelist, taking care of all the ministry duties that God puts before us. **All of that is a response to what Jesus has done, as we live out our discipleship to Jesus so that others would also be disciples of Jesus.**

And Paul is saying that he has finished well with these things. He started poorly. He was further back than Dave Wottle was half way through that 800 meter race. He was running the wrong direction, even! And yet Paul had a finishing kick unlike any other.

So: How's your "race" going? Are you fighting the good fight? Are you finishing the race well? We never quite know whether or not we're near the finish line, right? But presuming we'll all live to a nice ripe, old age...of course some of you are thinking "I already am at a nice ripe old age," so I'm not sure what you do with that...but presuming we all have a finish line that's not while we're sitting here in church, and we've got this week, this month, this year, the next few years and for some of us hopefully several more decades: How do you want to finish out the rest of your race? Do you want to finish well? And that doesn't mean we should wait until we think the end is near. Paul got off to a slow start but from what we can ascertain in Acts, he spent a couple decades advancing the gospel message and making disciples of Jesus. Our "finishing kick" doesn't need to be the very tail end. And so: **Paul's words here are to Timothy, a young man whom Paul was mentoring...but they can be encouragement for any of us to live our faith well.**

Maybe the relationship Paul has with Timothy, of mentoring him in the faith, is an inspiration for you and you could mentor someone a generation or two below you. Maybe you haven't always been prepared, regardless of the season, to talk about your faith. Maybe your life has been more like Paul's

before he met Jesus, and your race is off to a slow start. Maybe you're somewhere else on the spectrum of faith...but if you knew you'd cross that finish line pretty soon, would you be able to say with Paul, "I've fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith?" I hope so. **So let's each run the rest of the race so we finish well.** You can finish strong. Like so many of the saints who've gone before us – in the Bible and in the nearly 2,000 years since – you don't have to be famous. Your name doesn't need to be in lights, or have a special title. You just run the race before you, and run it well. And one day, that crown of righteousness will be yours as well, as Jesus places it upon your head, and he will say to you something like these words, "You fought the good fight, you finished the race, you kept the faith. Well done, good and faithful servant." Let's live out those words right now, for the rest of the race. Let's Pray...Amen.

ⁱ Today's sermon correlates to Chapter 30 in "The Story." We took orders for copies of the book, "The Story" at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for "NIV The Story Bible" at their website.

ⁱⁱ Jackson, Wayne. "Nero Caesar and the Christian Faith." ChristianCourier.com. Access date: April 19, 2018.
<https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/623-nero-caesar-and-the-christian-faith>