

Christian Endurance: A Pastoral Exhortation

I often speak with those who name the name of Christ, but over the years find they are in a state of apathy. Maybe they are not as faithful as they once were. Maybe they aren't as bold as they once were in evangelism. Maybe, as they have grown older, they find they are not regular in church attendance as they once were when their kids were in the house. All of us, in and of ourselves, are prone to wander. Indwelling sin still remains! The devil, our adversary, is still a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Pet. 5:8). And, when we read our Bibles and see the examples of those who have gone before us, we see men and women of faith struggle through this life, as they wait for God to make ALL THINGS right one day. If you are like me you struggle with the same sins. And in your spirit, you say, "*how long*" and "*when will this struggle cease?*" Besides our own struggles with sin, we see sickness, maladies that affect our bodies and our spirits. Natural disasters such as the fires in California that affect us in so many ways. On and on I could go. Today, I want to preach a sermon on Christian endurance. I've done this before and I will continue to do so, both to myself and to you, as long as the Lord gives. One of the things I remind myself of, and tell others is this: It is not how we begin the race, but how we finish it. AND, God is a God of grace. I want to practically unpack those words with the expectation that we will press on as Christians with great endurance in this great race. (And of course, if you are not a Christian, I will plead with you to enter the race.) I have 3 parts to the sermon and some applications to follow: 1) The Christian Life is a race. 2) Therefore, finish the race; 3) And, God will give you grace to finish this race.

1. The Christian Life Is a Race. Three times (assuming Hebrews authorship) the Apostle Paul speaks of the Christian life as a race. In 1 Cor. 9:24 he says "**Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.**" At the end of his life, he tells Timothy: "**I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith**" (2 Tim. 4:7). And finally, in Heb. 12:1-2 we read, "**Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.**"

Brothers and sisters, what we do as Christians is pictured as a race. My life has been full of competitive races. Whether I was racing my sister on long car trips to be the first to find the most license plates, or whether it was on the playgrounds of elementary schools to win the 40 yard dash, or whether it was beating Joe in the backyard as we played baseball with tennis balls, or even today, getting on the rowing machine and trying to beat my previous times, life is full of such races. And such is the Christian life. The life of faith is a race. It has a beginning and an end (in a manner of speaking). My race as a Christian began in college when I heard the message of the Bible that Jesus is the Son of God and that salvation could only be found in Him. So, I believed! So began my race. As Christians many of you have the same story. And as all races

here on earth have an ending, so does our life of faith. One day, our faith will be sight. Jesus is the goal of our race; He is the prize of our race. And so we race! So we run!

2. Therefore, Finish the Race. In 1 Cor. 9:24 (from above) Paul speaks of the prize coming. In 2 Tim. 4:7, at the end of his life, he says, ***"I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."*** In Heb. 12:1-2 the end of the race is implied. Jesus himself says on three different occasions, ***"He who endures to the end will be saved"*** (Mark 13:13; Matt. 10:22; 24:13). Brothers and sisters, our goal is Christ, but, we must finish the race. Now, there are many verses in the NT that say things like . . . we are ***"united to Christ"*** or we are ***"seated with him in the heavenly places"*** or we have already come ***"to the heavenly city."*** This means that Christians, NOW, possess Christ. NOW He is ours. NOW we are ***"ruling with him."*** So, my question, is ***"How can he be our goal at the end of the race and yet be ours now?"*** Or, to put it another way, ***"How can something we already possess, also be what we are waiting for, what we are racing to?"*** Well, I think you know the answer. There is an ***"already"*** but ***"not yet"*** aspect to the Christian life.

The reason we possess Christ now is because NOW our sins are forgiven. NOW the wrath of God does not fall upon us. NOW, all the blessings of God for life and godliness are ours in Christ. As the Son of God, Christ did everything necessary for us to have peace and favor with God. The Son of God took on flesh. He lived a sinless life. He laid down his life on the cross, taking the sins of his people upon himself, taking our shame and our guilt, taking ALL the wrath of God that we deserved. He died on the cross. But, then three days later, he rose again. ***"After making purification for sin he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high"*** (Heb. 1:3). And now He reigns! And the Bible says we are reigning with him, until all his enemies are made his footstool. And how are we reigning? We reign through the power that He gives. NOW, in the new covenant, we are given the Holy Spirit. By the Holy Spirit, we are united to Him NOW. I think of Paul's words to Titus (and to us) in Tit. 2:11-14: ***"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."*** These words speak of the power given to us now to run the race. However, we are still exhorted to finish the race.

There are so many verses, but I think of 1 Tim. 6:11-14: These words are for me and for you as Christians. Listen to them closely! ***"But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach***

until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .” Press on Brothers and sisters! Finish the race! This brings us to our last part.

3. **Know that God Is a God of Grace.** Recall my words from the beginning. *“It is not as important how you begin the race, but how you finish it. And . . . God is a God of grace!”* This is the best news of all. This means that no matter where you are in this fight of faith, God is a God of grace. Eph. 2:8-10: **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”**

And here is what I mean by this when I say these words to the person in the marathon of life at mile marker 5 or 10 or 15 or 20 or even 25. I think back to the words of Zechariah as Israel was heading back into Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. In 4:6-7 he proclaims: **“This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts. Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of ‘Grace, grace to it!’”** These words speak of the temple in Jerusalem. But, they look forward to the true temple, the Lord Jesus Christ. And they look forward to the days of the Messiah when he will pour out his Spirit upon his church. God proclaims, **“Who are you O great mountain?”** And then, **“You shall become a plain.”** This is God’s way of saying to the Christian today, there is no mountain in your life that I cannot take away as you run this race. There is no obstacle in your path that God will not remove.

Are you backslidden? God says **“Return to me and I will return to you”** (Zech. 1:1-3). Is your life filled with apathy? God can change that as you look to him. Parents, are you neglecting family worship these days because you are too busy? Repent! God is a God of grace! Do the works that you once did. Are you allowing ungodliness to creep in through ungodly apps and videos and unwholesome shows? God is a God of grace! Repent! No matter where you are in the race, pick up the pace. To those who are older, are you discouraged because you can’t do what you once did. Well, consider the words of Paul: **“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus . . .”** And, **“We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us”** **“Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison . . .”** (2 Cor. 4:7-10; “16-17). Has entertainment or leisure become an idol in your life and you know it . . . and as you hear these words you know these things are sinful. Well, repent! If your right eye causes you to sin, cut it out. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. (Matt. 5:29). Brothers and sisters, our hearts are “idol factories.” But, God is a God of grace! And as you turn to Him, **“though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”** God could no sooner abandon his beloved who are in Christ than a nursing mother could abandon her

child. **“He who began a good work in you will complete it at the day of Jesus Christ”** (Phil. 1:6).

Brothers and sisters, we live by faith. Faith is God’s gift to us NOW. This is why Paul can say, *“I have kept the faith.”* This life is the race of faith. And what happens at the end of this race, either by death or Jesus’ coming? We will see him as He is. SIGHT! As Paul says, **“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love”** (1 Cor. 13:13). We know that both faith and hope will pass. Why? Because when we see Him as He is, there will be no need for faith and hope. This is why we walk by *“faith and not by sight.”* NOW, we have the *“downpayment,”* the *“firstfruits”* of what is to come as Christ has given us the Holy Spirit. And those who have the Holy Spirit have faith. This means those who have the Holy Spirit are in the race.

And God gives us gracious warnings to keep us running. This is what He is doing today through the preaching of such a message, both in my life and in yours. The Christian life is a race. And those who endure to the end will be saved. And, God is a God of grace. If you are Christian, be encouraged! God is a God of grace! So press on! Now, let me finish with a few applications.

True Christians Run and Finish the race.

This is what we do. I think of Peter. At one point Jesus began to speak some very difficult words to those who were following him. And many walked away because of the difficulty of his teaching. And he looks to Peter and his closest disciples asking, “Will you also go away?” Do you remember Peter’s reply? He says, ***“Where else will we go? You have the words of eternal life”*** (John 6).

The ability to run and finish the race comes from God. Again, Tit. 2:11-14: **“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”**

You cannot run this race alone. You need accountability. You need the church. You need God’s people. You will not finish the race without those sitting next to you. This is God’s design. We are in this together! So, make sure you are regularly meeting with God’s people here at church. And, invest your time and efforts in your home groups as you will find more specific accountability in the day to day tasks. Meet with someone on an individual basis for accountability.

Though all Christians are in the race, they are not all at the same place. Young, old, more mature, backsliding, struggling, on top of “mt. Everest,” etc. Therefore, exhort one another to press on!

If you are not in the race, look unto Christ (Gospel!).

To the Elders: As Paul exhorted those believers of his day, so we must also be about exhorting those under our care to PRESS ON! To look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. This means that we are always looking first to ourselves and then to others as we set an example (See 1 Tim. 4)

Brothers and sisters, I MUST practice what I preach! Otherwise, I myself will be disqualified! And what may happen to you? I hate to think! This is why I often say these words to myself at this stage of life: **“It’s not how I begin the race, but how I finish. And God is a God of grace!”**