A Story Unfinished

Hebrews 12:1b-2a
…let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith...

Intro

• On New Year’s Eve, Ryder was celebrating his 5th birthday
  o at beach in California.

• At the tender age of 5,
  o Ryder loved to walk the beach
    ▪ in search of crabs and small shrimp,
  o however, on his birthday
    ▪ he found something that he’d never seen before:
      • A message in a bottle.

• He first thought he had found a message
  o from a castaway pirate,
    ▪ however the letter inside the bottle said:
      • Hi my name is Chris.
      • I am 10 years old and in the 5th grade.
      • I live in Sacramento, California.
      • Call me when you find this to let me know where it washed ashore.
  o The letter contained a phone number
    ▪ and was dated: September 5th, 1988

• In an effort to find the author of the note,
  o Ryder’s parents contacted a Sacramento TV station,
    ▪ which made a special effort to find Chris,
      • who would now be 38 years old.
  o However, in spite of the fact
    ▪ that they had the phone number
      • as an initial clue to the identity of the letter writer,
        o there were no records in existence
          ▪ telling who owned
            • that phone number in 1988.
  o Their search reached as far as the Library of Congress,
    ▪ but still, at every turn
      • it came up short.

• The TV station finally resorted
  o to calling every 36-39 year old
    ▪ Chris,
Christopher,
Christine,
or Christina,
  • in the Sacramento area
    o but still they were unable to find the letter writer.

• Finally they resorted to publishing the story,
  o in hopes of turning something up,
    ▪ which is how I learned about
      • the message in the bottle.

• It is great story.
  o A story of one 10-year-old child’s curiosity
    ▪ and another 5-year-old child’s lucky find.
  o The hope is that one day Chris and Ryder will meet
    ▪ and the bottle will be returned to its original owner
      • after 28 years at sea.

• However, until that happens,
  o it is a story... unfinished!

Stories
• Nothing is quite as unsatisfying
  o as an unfinished story.
• I couldn’t believe it when I read the article.
  o I couldn’t believe the story was incomplete,
    ▪ that it had no ending.
      • How disappointing.
• Let’s be real, we all like a good story
  o because it ends well,
    ▪ but there is something unsettling
      • about a story without an ending.

• A story without an ending bothers us
  o because it hits a little too close to home.
• We like a story with lots thrills,
  o dramatic turns,
    ▪ moments of intense drama
      • punctuated by flashes of tender passion.
• We like a story that keeps our attention,
  o that keeps us on the edge of our seat,
    ▪ that sticks in our minds
      • for days and weeks after its over.

• We like a story with lots of drama
  o because we know and understand
    ▪ that the author has to play by certain rules.
• We don’t mind the tension,
  o we embrace the disasters,
    ▪ we look forward to the fight
    • because we are pretty sure
      o that by the end
        ▪ it is all going to be all right.

• We are convinced,
  o before the story ever starts,
    ▪ that good is going to triumph
    • and the evil is going to be defeated.

• We feel secure in the knowledge
  o that the hero usually survives
    ▪ and that the greater good always prevails.

• The reason why we like a good story
  o is because we’ve learned,
    ▪ from experience,
      • that we can trust a good storyteller.

• The truth is, though,
  o that we really only like a good story,
    ▪ when it’s about someone else.

• As long as someone else
  o is dealing with the stress and the drama,
    ▪ as long as someone else
      • is struggling with the doubts and fears,
        o as long as someone else
          ▪ has to face the uncertainty.

• We delight in stories
  o of the tragedies and triumphs of others
    ▪ because we are convinced
      • that their story will end well.
  o We all know that nobody tells stories
    ▪ that don’t end well!

• The reason why we don’t like
  o to be the subject of the story
    ▪ is because, when the story is about us,
      • we aren’t so certain about the outcome.

• Let me get right down
  o to where the rubber meets the road,
    ▪ we like our stories in 45 minute
      • or two hour intervals
  o because we’ve learned
    ▪ that those kind of stories usually end well.
  o We’ve learned to trust
• the person writing the story.

• But when it comes to the story of our life,
  o when it comes to the tragedies and trials
    • of day-today living,
  o we aren’t so convinced
    • that we can truly trust
      • the author of our story!

• The problem isn’t that we struggle with stories.
  o We love stories.

• The problem is that we struggle with unfinished stories!
  o And our personal story
    • is a story of unresolved tensions
      • and uncertain endings.

• We don’t know the end of our story,
  o and that bothers us
    • because each of us has long since
      • come face to face with reality
    • and each of us has known
      • enough disappointments and defeats
        o to temper our expectations.
  o Our faith becomes jaded
    • by our experience
  o and our hopes are somewhat lessened
    • by our doubts and our fears,
  o and the uncertainty of life
    • robs us of the joy of the journey
      • as life hits us with unexpected challenges.

• Trouble and trial
  o seem to be our constant companions
    • and it seems as if our story is always
      • on the verge of ending in disaster.

• Because we just aren’t sure
  o that we can trust
    • the unseen hand of the author.

The Author
• I come to this pulpit tonight,
  o under the anointing of God,
    • to remind you that you
      • Who the author is.
  o When you gave your life to Jesus,
    • when you knelt at an altar
      • and surrendered everything to him,
    • you relinquished control of your story
• to the one that the writer of Hebrews called
  • “the author and finisher of our faith.”
• I think its time you stopped
  o and considered the author tonight!
• He doesn’t write bad endings!
  o He makes all things work together for good.
    ▪ He always causes us to triumph in Christ Jesus.
  o He makes us, not just conquerors,
    ▪ but more than conquerors,
      • more than overcomers.
• He doesn’t just promise
  o that we are going to come out
    ▪ on the other side,
  o he promises that when we
    ▪ emerge from the valley
      • we will be the victor,
  o he promises that when we
    ▪ come through the trial,
      • whatever the outcome,
        o we will have been triumphant.
• He doesn’t promise
  o that there won’t be heartache,
    ▪ he doesn’t promise
      • that there will never be bad news,
  o his is not the false assurance
    ▪ that the story will always be pleasant
      • and free from moments crisis and doubt,
  o but he promises us
    ▪ that if we keep our trust in him,
      • if continue to do what we know to do,
        o He is going to bring us through.
• Let me tell you something
  o about the author of your story,
    ▪ he writes stories worth telling
      • and if you will trust him with your story,
        ▪ he will write the perfect story for your life.
• Jesus is not just the author of your story,
  o he’s finisher of your faith.
    ▪ He’s never written an unfinished story.
  o You may not be able
    ▪ to see the end from where you are,
  o you may not be able
    ▪ to imagine a favorable outcome
• to your story,
  o but that’s not your job.
  
  o He writes the endings,
    ▪ he finishes the story,
  • he brings all things to pass
    o according to the power of his word.

• Listen to me, because this is what God told me
  o to tell somebody in this place tonight,
    ▪ your story isn’t finished.
  • God isn’t done with your story yet!
    o He isn’t finished with your life.

• You may think, you know the ending,
  o you may think that you have it all figured out,
    ▪ you may have resigned yourself
      • to a certain outcome,
  o but until you draw your last breath
    ▪ you need to understand
      • that you are in the middle
        o of an unfinished story.

• Don’t you dare put a period
  o where God is getting ready to write another paragraph.

• Don’t you dare fall into the fatalistic trap
  o of believing that the outcome is settled.
    ▪ It’s not over until its over
      • and as long as the author
        o still has the pen in his hands,
          ▪ your story isn’t over!

Moses
• Think about it for minute.
• Moses messed up the plan of God for his life.
  He was supposed to be the deliverer,
    o he was supposed to be the one
      ▪ to set his people free
    o but he got ahead of God,
      ▪ he tried to do it on his own,
        • in his own way,
    o and, instead of a deliverer,
      ▪ he became a murder
        • and a fugitive from the law.

• Forced to run for his life
  o he found himself in Midian,
    ▪ married and raising a family
      • as a stranger in a strange land.
• His fall was dramatic.
  o He went from the king’s palace
    ▪ to keeping sheep
      ▪ on the backside of the desert.
  o I’m not sure where the backside of the desert is
    ▪ but I’m pretty certain that is a description
      ▪ that is intended to convey
  o the kind of place where no one goes on purpose
    ▪ and where those who find themselves there
      ▪ are forever trapped,
        o a land of forgotten dreams
          ▪ and broken promises.

• It was there, on the backside of nowhere,
  o that Moses found himself settling
    ▪ for something less than his dream,
      ▪ selling himself short
        o of the purpose and reason for his life.
  o But somehow he made peace with that fact,
    ▪ after all, he got here by his own hand,
      ▪ it was his fault,
        ▪ he brought it on himself.
  o He was the one who made
    ▪ the terrible tragic mistake
      ▪ that banished him to this nomadic lifestyle.

• And, for no less than 40 years,
  o a lifetime,
    ▪ he lived in the shadow of his mistake.
  o He toiled in hot sun,
    ▪ watching his father-in-law’s sheep
      ▪ with no company at all
        o except the haunting questions
          ▪ of what could have been.

• I’m reasonably certain
  o that, by the time Moses had lived in Midian
    ▪ for 40 long years,
      ▪ the story was all but over
        o as far as he was concerned.

• I’m reasonably certain
  o that the last person that ever expected
    ▪ a divine, life-changing encounter with God
      ▪ was Moses at Midian.

• But I want you to listen
  o to what I’m about to tell you,
God wasn’t finished with Moses yet!
- As a matter of fact, God wasn’t even
  - good and started with Moses yet!
- Don’t make the mistake of assuming
  - that your failures invalidate you
  - or that your story has to be over
    - because of the years
      - you’ve spent in the wilderness.
- Listen to this preacher tonight.
  - As long as there is breath in your body,
    - your story isn’t finished yet.
- Don’t presume that you know
  - the end of the story.
    - Don’t presume that your failures
      - dictate the limits of God’s grace.
  - God sent me to this pulpit tonight
    - to remind someone,
      - you’re in the middle
        - of an unfinished story!

Joseph
- Joseph’s story was completely different,
  - but no less disappointing.
- His story was utterly sidetracked
  - through no fault of his own.
- He was betrayed by his dreams,
  - abandoned by his brethren
    - and condemned to life in foreign country
      - among foreign people.
- His is a story with dramatic ups and downs.
  - He goes from defeat to success
    - only to fall again to the depths of prison.
- But even then the hand of God exalts him
  - and he rises from the lowest of lows
    - to the highest of highs
      - and finds himself second only to Pharaoh
        - in all the land of Egypt.
- As satisfying as that should have been,
  - as rewarding as his newfound
    - wealth and position should have been to him.
- It was a heartbroken Joseph
  - that resigned himself to living out his days
    - in the land of Egypt,
      - a stranger from his father’s household.
• No doubt, he had long since given up
  o  on the dreams,
    ▪  no doubt he had long since resolved
      •  that this was all there would ever be
        o  to his story.
• Can you imagine his surprise
  o  when his brothers appeared before him?
• He never expected that,
  o  it was reunion that he long given up on.
    ▪  It was the fulfillment of prophetic dream
      •  that he had probably done his best to forget.
• God wasn’t finished with Joseph yet.
  o  I’ve come to tell somebody in the place
    ▪  not to let your bitterness
      •  or disappointments
        o  dictate the end of your story for you.
• You’ve been wounded,
  o  you’ve been hurt,
    ▪  you’ve suffered the painful wound
      •  that is received in the house of a friend,
  o  but listen to what I’m telling you,
    ▪  your story isn’t finished yet!
      •  God isn’t done with you yet!

David
• David was a man after God’s own heart.
  o  The shepherd boy became a warrior
    ▪  and God used him to accomplish
      •  great and mighty things.
  o  But over time the warrior became a king.
    ▪  David was a much better warrior
      •  than he ever was a king.
• As a king he became a little lax
  o  in his own personal devotions.
    ▪  As a king he became a little intoxicated
      •  with his power and position.
    ▪  As a king he decided to let others do the fighting
      •  while he did kingly stuff
        o  back at the palace.
• It was his own fault
  o  that he was on that roof
    ▪  where he shouldn’t have been,
      •  during an hour of the day
        o  when he knew what he would see.
• It was lust that compelled him
  o to take another man’s wife.
• He never intended for the pregnancy to happen,
  o but he certainly intended
    ▪ to hide what he had done.
• It was a cruel, conniving, guilty king
  o that finally had a faithful soldier
    ▪ carry his own death warrant
      • back to the field of battle.
• The singing shepherd,
  o the mighty warrior,
    ▪ had become a murderous king.
• The prophet of God would confront him
  o and stick his bony finger in his face
    ▪ and declare to him,
      • David, you are the man!
• You have committed this terrible atrocity,
  o you, who have so much,
    ▪ have taken from him who had so little.
• David’s failure was tremendous.
  o But I am amazed every time
    ▪ I look back over the lineage of Jesus,
      • how that God purposefully grafted
        o David’s sin with Bathsheba
          ▪ into the lineage of Jesus Christ.
  o I have no doubt
    ▪ that, when David stepped on that rooftop,
      • he stepped outside of the will
        o and purpose of God,
    ▪ however, somehow, within his divine providence,
      • God made a provision within his will for
        o or that mistake to end up
          ▪ in the lineage of the Messiah.
• You may feel like you’ve messed up so bad
  o that your story has to end
    ▪ in tragedy and defeat,
• but listen to this preacher on a Sunday evening.
  o If God can take David’s great failing
    ▪ and graft it into the lineage of the Messiah,
      • the Lamb who was slain
        o from the foundations of the world,
    ▪ then you need to understand tonight
      • that your failings
and your shortcomings

- are nothing that God cannot overcome.

**The End From The Beginning**

- The scripture says
  - that He knows the ending from the beginning.
    - God knew your faults and flaws
      - before he ever called you.
    - He knew your propensity
      - to follow after your flesh
        - and abandon your faith
          - before he ever filled you with his spirit.
  - He knew exactly how you would mess up,
    - before you ever made the first mistake.
  - When your faith was fresh,
    - when your heart was on fire,
      - when all this was brand new,
        - he knew you would struggle,
          - he knew you would stumble,
            - he knew the very mistakes
              - that you would make.
  - But if He can look
    - through the eons of time
      - and see an adulterous affair
        - between David and Bathsheba
      - and determine to bring
        - the lineage of the messiah
          - through Solomon,
            - the son of that union,
      - then you need to understand
        - that his mercy has already
          - made provision for your mistake!
  - Your failure may have surprised you,
    - it may have been something
      - that you never anticipated,
        - but God wasn’t shocked.
  - He knew
    - before he ever filled you with his spirit
      - that you would need
        - to pray back through again,
          - and again
            - and yet again.
  - Listen to me,
    - from the very beginning,
• he knew all there was to know about you
  • and he still wrote a perfect ending
    o for your life
• and nothing that you have done
  • between then and now
    o has taken him by surprise.

• Somebody needs to hear me tonight,
  o your life is not the product of random chance
    • and your story doesn’t have to be defined
      • by your litany of failures.
• God has a purpose for your life.
  o He is your creator
    • and you are his creation.
  o You were intentionally made
    • and your life is a beautiful story
      • of grace and mercy
        o that he is just waiting to reveal
          • to the whole world!

• Don’t judge your story
  o by where you are right now.
• Don’t judge your story
  o by what has already happened in it.
• Listen to your pastor tonight,
  o you are in the middle of an unfinished story
    • and the outcome is not determined
      • by what has already occurred.
• I used to listen to a lot of talk radio
  o and the various precious metal dealers
    • would run their ads on talk radio.
• Every ad ended with the same disclosure:
  o *Past results are not indicative of future returns.*
    • If you are going to trade on futures, of any kind,
      • you can study the data of past results
        o all you want to
      • but you better learn
        o to temper your expectations
          • with the knowledge
      • that what happened in the past
        o has no power to define
          • what will happen in the future!

• It is high time that we realized,
  o when dealing with our own lives
that past results
  • do not have to dictate future events!

• You don’t have to stay in the cycle
  o you’ve been stuck in.
    ▪ You don’t have to keep repeating
      • your past mistakes.

• You don’t have to live under the shadow
  o of a generational curse.
    ▪ You don’t have to always be
      • what you have always been.

• You need to realize
  o that the ending doesn’t have to be
    ▪ defined by the way you began!

• It is time to recognize
  o that your story isn’t over yet
    ▪ and let your ending be written
      • by the author and finisher of your faith.

CLOSE: Run The Race
• Paul envisions the Christian life
  o as a race that is run
    ▪ in the pursuit of an eternal crown.

• And, as he contemplates
  o the ramifications of that comparison,
    ▪ he encourages his readers
      • to run with patience
        o the race that is set before them.

• The runner doesn’t determine the course.
  o The runner doesn’t choose the route.

• The runner has to deal
  o with the highs and the lows,
    ▪ the ups and the downs
      • as they occur along the way.
    ▪ He has no power over the course.
  o The only thing that he has power over
    ▪ is his own sense of determination
      • to finish the race.

• That’s what Paul is referencing
  o when he says to run with patience.
    ▪ The word patience, there, means endurance.

• This is an endurance race,
  o not a short sprint.
    ▪ This is a race to the end
      • and the prize doesn’t necessarily go
        o to the fastest,
or the most talented,

- the prize goes to the ones
  - who endure to the end.

- With that encouragement in mind,
  - Paul tells us to look upon Jesus,
    - to fix our eyes on him
      - the way that a runner focuses
        - on the destination,
      - and recognize
        - that He is the author
          - and the finisher of our faith!
  - What Paul is saying
    - is that we need to realize
      - that this race, is an unfinished story...
        - Your life is an unfinished story...
    - The circumstances unfolding right now
      - are not the end of your story...

- The challenge is to keep our eyes and Jesus,
  - not to pass judgment
    - on an unfinished story,
  - but to keep running,
    - keep believing,
      - keep trusting him
        - and let him write the ending!
          - Because he writes a story worth telling!

- Let me challenge you tonight,
  - To put your story
    - back into the hands of the one
      - who is the author and the finisher of your faith!