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# Finishing Your Course with Joy

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## Going Out with a Smile

*But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. Acts 20:24*

Paul is on his way from Macedonia to give an offering to the Jerusalem church and making his way through Asia Minor or Turkey as we know it and sends a message ahead to the Ephesian elders to meet him at Miletus about 30 miles from Ephesus to make his final address to them. Paul's heart was knit to these brethren as he ministered to them for over three years which was more than most of the other churches. This is how Paul did his ministry, but the heart of the passage, for Paul and for us is to stay on course and to finish our course with joy.

As you observe this hourglass, it demonstrates for us that time is running out, and one day we will finish our course and run our race. In visits to the hospital it begins to sink in that one day it will all be over for us in this world, in this life, and we will stand before our Creator to give an account of our lives, how we ran the race of life, how we finished our course.

Some in our congregation who are being reminded of the brevity of life have been a great source of inspiration to us all.

As we approach closer and closer to Christ's coming, the Bible describes a dark picture for this world and it does not speak of ease and comfort for Christians, we better be ready. If we are not ready during the easy times, how will we be ready when, not if, it gets tough? What do we do to get ready? You have to think of it like getting ready for a race.

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### **I. Steps to Understanding your Course**

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- A. I begin at the end only briefly and I'll return to it at the end. I begin with this not because it isn't known, but because people don't want to be reminded of it, bothered with it, or to think about

it in light of eternity, but it is a step that must be taken or one will go to hell! What would you think of someone who knew they were about to go to battle in the next year, but did nothing to prepare himself, or get some training? He would be thought of as foolish. I say this not to ridicule, but to help, for so I was before God saved me, and so were the rest of us and we would still be in that state of the fear of death, were it not for the grace of God; we have nothing to boast of except in what Jesus did on the cross.

- B.** To desire to finish one's course with joy begins with an honest recognition of the fact that one day we will be finished whether we are ready or not.
- C.** Whether we want to admit it or not, from the world's standpoint, we are all destined to be "has-beens". That, in and of itself, is a most humbling thought.
- D.** Many much more clever, more wealthy, more healthy, more famous, more influential, more talented, more good looking, more charismatic, and mighty than we have fallen to that great enemy of death
- E.** Thomas Watson said, "Let them fear death who do not fear sin". Do you fear sin? Our fear of death is due to our wicked sins that our just and good God will judge us, for that begins a person to think about finishing well.

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## ***II. Four Steps to Finishing your Course with Joy***

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- A.** In this race of life God doesn't tell you to run the same exact course Paul ran, or the one I am to run, but there are some principles which contain the necessary elements for any runner in the race of life.

- B. This race of life is an open invitation, or an all-inclusive race, that all will participate in. Out of every nation, kindred, and tongue, from every generation. We arrive at the starting block when we are conceived in our mother's womb, and as soon as that starting gun fires its shot we start the race and pop out of our mother's belly. Multitudes have already died and finished their course. There is no question as to whether we will finish our course or not. Everyone will finish the race of life. But, some like Nietzsche who believed God was dead, died virtually penniless, friendless, in an insane asylum, Anna Nicole Smith overdosed on drugs, Elvis Presley overdosed on drugs, and a host of others who were the idolized rich and famous, who were thought to be the happiest, but they did not finish their course with joy, but people like Joe Wilson, T.P. Simmons, not famous, not rich, but died trusting in Jesus to the end and they finished their course with joy,
- C. In order to properly prepare for any race is to realize what the nature of the race is. Is it a rat race that is on the circle of life and it goes nowhere or is there a purpose and destiny to our lives? Is it a sprint? Is it a long distance run, is it a marathon, is it cross country or on a track?
1. Many people are assuming they need to be preparing for a marathon on a smooth track, like the hare did when he ran against the tortoise. Lollygagging around, lounging, not prepared to finish well at all, but finishes with shame and sadness, not joy. (Most, especially as they grow older, long to leave a legacy and to have some purpose in their life that goes beyond their life).

2. The strange thing about this race is that you don't know whether it is a sprint or a marathon. We don't know about the terrain. There will be smooth tracks and rough cross country terrain, some have more of one than the other, and both can be treacherous! As a matter of fact, it is like an obstacle course into the darkness of the unknown that requires God's Word to be a light to our path and a lamp unto our feet. But still, how do you prepare for that? By looking to the light of God's Word which brings us to the first step to finishing our course with joy.

**D.** STEP ONE—Proper Desire: What is the first step to finishing your course with joy? Paul began with a desire which was planted by the Word and the Holy Spirit when he was born again on the road to Damascus in **Acts 9**, and from then on, it was, "Lord, what do You want me to do", not, "Lord, what will you do for me?" You see, Saul of Tarsus was going the wrong way, yes, he was going fast, but the wrong way. It doesn't matter how fast you are if you are going the wrong way, and if you go the wrong way, you lose, and that is not the way to finish with joy.

1. That reminds me of when I was in my first year of organized football in Pop Warner League; my dad was in the announcer's booth doing the play by play. I was on defense and made my first interception. I was so excited, so I began running with all my might, I was getting it, I was determined to make a touchdown, to finish this play with joy, but much to my dismay I was going in the direction of making a touchdown for the other team!

I heard my dad all excited and then I heard him say something about going the wrong way, and I quickly made a U turn and started going the right way and prevented the other team from getting the ball and a touchdown made by me for them.

2. The Lord announced to Paul from heaven in so many words, Why are you going the wrong way, the way of the transgressor is hard, turn from your sins and believe on Me, Jesus, and live for Me, and go the right way, for I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
3. The world would say that the key to finishing well is to live for self, live a life of it's all about me, if I have the most toys at the end I win.
4. All that will be far from a comfort on your deathbed; as a matter of fact, it will be a torment on your deathbed.
5. So, step one is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.

**F.** STEP TWO—Proper Training: The second step was to be trained in the Word. He was baptized in the church at Damascus and hit the ground running, he learned in the local church, even though he was a great apostle. These who buck against the local church are bucking against God's pattern for finishing their course with joy. He learned in Arabia for three years.

1. There must be training in conditioning and technique and it takes time. There must be a coach for direction, accountability, direction, teaching, oversight. There must be determination, giftedness,



2. A newborn babe in Christ is like the toddler who when he gets half a chance to run, he hits the floor running with a joy and excitement that can be seen all over his face and heard all out of his mouth, just giggling and laughing like he was on a rollercoaster or something! That's the way we Christians start off, but after awhile sometimes we lose sight of those earlier years. The problem is that we don't receive the proper teaching or we don't apply what we have learned. Let's see the lessons Paul learned and how he applied them.

**F.** STEP THREE—Proper Application: The third step was to apply what the coach teaches you. For lack of a better word, the Lord our God is like the head coach and the pastors and teachers (which we all are with our life) are assistant coaches. Their job is not only to teach proper techniques of running the race and finishing our course with joy and conditioning so that we will finish well, but to encourage obedience and in Christ's case, also to enable obedience, for without Him we can do nothing. This is what was taught to Paul.

1. Let's look at **Acts 20:17-24**. Why didn't the threat of afflictions and persecutions move or veer Paul from the course God had laid out for him? He was not focused on those things, Paul was not focused on himself. He was determined through Christ, by the grace of God to finish well.
2. **Acts 20:24** *But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself...*, He had a right attitude about his life, didn't hold his life dear to himself. A hard life, difficulties, much

opposition, God was holding the steering wheel, not him. Paul wanted to be a part of what God would do. It began with his Damascus Road experience in conversion. What do you want me to do Lord? Not what will You do for me? Paul's life was less important than my mission and ministry that God has given him. How? He had an eternal perspective, not kill or hurt himself, for he fled, got guards, appealed to Caesar. He who loses his life shall save it, and he who saves it shall lose it. America is caught up in self-preservationism. In **ch.20-21**, bounds and afflictions, **21:14**, Paul was determined. Not self-determination but with joy looking forward to heaven and Christ. **Acts 22, 26**, not disobedient to heavenly vision. It wasn't all about Paul, living for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit was more important than life itself. Living for Jesus was more important than having a new house, more important than having the latest fad, more important than having a fat bank account, more important than a good job, more important than being famous, more important than having a life of ease and comfort, more important than a good retirement income, more important than our family, more important than being liked by the world, more important than good health, more important than anything!

3. If we want to finish well, if we want to run the race of life and finish our course with joy, we must count living for Christ more important than anything even our own life

itself. How do I know that? Read the rest of the verse...But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

4. When you realize Jesus has truly saved you from your sins, saved you from your evil ingratitude, saved you from your wicked selfishness, saved you from the blasphemous setting yourself up on the throne and worshipped yourself as god, calling the shots, making the rules, saved you from your hateful thoughts, saved you from your lustful thoughts, saved you from your wicked deeds, saved you from the very pit of a never ending punishment in hell itself, it's not hard to desire to live a life for Jesus and not as hard to live a life for Jesus as being the most important thing in this world.
5. Not only did Paul stop at just finishing his course with joy, but he spoke of his ministry being intimately connected with that. He had a right attitude about ministry, to serve, whosoever shall be great shall be the servant, if we have a servant's heart we will always have a ministry. Now, I understand that we do not have the same exact ministry as the Apostle Paul nor the same course, but the principles are there as I said in the beginning. We all have our own ministry, or service in God's Kingdom. We all testify or witness, we shall be witnesses Jesus said to his church, but will we be a good witness or not. If not we cannot



finish our course with joy. See *1Peter 4:7-11*, **7 ¶ But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer. 8 And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. 9 Use hospitality one to another without grudging. 10 As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 11 If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.**

6. He had a right attitude about the message to testify of the gospel of the grace of God, missions is not about missions, church is not about church, it is all about Christ. Life is about Christ and His great and glorious gospel. With the life and with the lips. The good news that we are saved from sins and reconciled to God our Creator, and heaven is prepared for all who believe on Him. The Holy Spirit testifies solemnly that bonds and afflictions abide with you and to seriously testify of the gospel of grace. The word signifies seriousness, which is important in a day when so many are saying to lighten up, make it funny, joke around, but that is not biblical, not that we shouldn't have joy or be able to joke in a different context, but it would seem that

to do so as is done today would make us like Lot when warning his son-in-laws to flee Sodom and Gomorrah they thought he was mocking or joking, why, because he used a nervous cowardly humor instead of serious solemn gentle reverent statements of love and warning. The idea of winning others to ourselves and then win them to Christ is almost deceptive and doesn't ring true, though we should live holy and love our enemies, the object is not to win them per se, but to win souls to Christ through the means of grace, the Word and the Spirit. Central consuming task of every believer is to solemnly testify of the gospel of God's grace, it is not if we will fulfill the Great Commission, but how well and where, everything else in life is subservient to this. Again, if we want to finish our course with joy we must finish our ministry as an individual in a local church.

- G.** STEP FOUR—Proper Faith: In **Acts 20:24** Paul was speaking ahead to a more distant future, but when we realize we are coming to the end, and many have no idea, but some by sheer reason of their advancing age or deteriorating and debilitating disease pick up on the reality. But it is important to see Paul's mindset in **Acts 20:22** And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there, and he was living in light of the fact that he didn't know when he would die. But, the Lord revealed to Paul somehow that his time was about to run out, he was about to finish his course. Let's see what he says in **2Timothy 4:6**:

1. **6 For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.** What? Paul you're ready to die? What do you think you are some kind of saint? Well, all God's people are saints. And there is a sense in which every child of God is ready through the sacrificial offering of Christ to be offered up to die, and the Lord gives dying grace in the hour it is needed. But, Paul was ready to be offered as a drink offering which was the last of the Old Testament sacrificial offerings to be made for the children of Israel after the burnt offering and the grain offerings. His life was a life of laying down his life as a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable to God which was the only reasonable service to such a great God, anything less was just plain unreasonable. He was ready to die because his whole life was one of sacrificial giving of himself for the cause of Christ and for the glory of Christ. Are we ready to be offered? Our time of departure may be at hand not knowing what shall befall us here.
2. What is striking is that Paul said, **6 For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.** Paul could not have been ready to be offered unless he had finished his course with joy as was his desire was in our text in **Acts 20:24**. Now how was Paul ready to be offered as his whole life passed before him as it does with those who are about to die? Three things:
  - a) **7 I have fought a good fight**, As a good soldier, fighting here has

the sense of agonizing, how much agonizing have we done in our labors for Christ? Calling on Christ to help us as we fight this flesh, as we fight the world, as we fight the devil and his angels, as we wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with principalities, and powers, and spiritual wickedness in high places? If we want to finish our course with joy we must war a good warfare and endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. I'm not talking about afflictions that even unsaved people go through like disappointments, sickness, etc...but afflictions because we are living for Christ as the most important thing in our life.

- b) ***I have finished my course***, As an Olympic runner, Paul finished his course, Paul had a sense of accomplishment, there weren't any "I wish I had's" as a dear brother used to say. That doesn't mean Paul was sinless, just read ***Romans 7***, but, as a righteous man is described in ***Proverbs***, he gets right back up though he fall seven times. When they laid Herb on the operating table he was up the next day and able to walk with no help (even though he had to be told to wait and let someone hold his arm). All believers like Paul have a deep sense of his their corruption, but when we are in the

mode of finishing our course with joy we have a deeper sense of God's grace, **Romans 7** at the end, I thank my Lord Jesus Christ! Assurance is of great benefit, and we need it, uncertainty brings fear and cripples us, regarding our job, health, etc...assurance brings peace, confidence, in the toughest of times, even at death, Moses, Peter, David, overcame past failures and finished well, Uzziah, Saul didn't, Lot didn't, are you still breathing, still have a pulse, you still have time to finish well, Herbie, mentally retarded and loving Jesus, though stunk, made fun of, shunned, despised, ignored, he still smiled and testified of God's grace

- c) ***I have kept the faith:*** As a good steward, Paul did not waver, he kept the faith, he guarded it, not his faith, not faith in himself, not the faith of false religion, not faith in the stock market, not faith in the political winds, not faith in the government, not faith in even friends and family, but faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. From the time Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he had kept that faith. He didn't let go, he treasured Christ as the Pearl of Great Price, held Him close to his bosom, not at arm's length. If we want to finish our course with joy, we must keep the faith.



3. **Hebrews 12:1-2, 1 ¶ Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, 2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.**

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### **III. The Steps from “Henceforth” to Finish your Course with Joy**

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- A.** The “*henceforth*” is a ray of hope for anyone who realizes that they are not in a position to finish their course with joy. If you are breathing and have a pulse, there is hope, to start right now, don’t wait, you may not have time, besides Paul’s was a whole life of living for Christ. If you are not saved, don’t wait to call upon Jesus to save you from your sins, to be your Saviour, look to Him now, why do you wait? What for? Is there really any good reason why you wait? Do want to finish your course with everlasting shame and contempt, with eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth, lifting up your eyes being in torments and crying for mercy and none will be given to you? Do you want to end up eternally in that state?
- B.** If you are a Christian, while you live and have your being there is hope to live as Paul lived and to finish your course with joy. Paul how could you finish your course with joy when you were persecuted, falsely accused, being a fool for Christ, being a servant, unappreciated, deserted by fair weather friends, ridiculed, whipped,

beaten, spit upon, slapped, stoned and left for dead, Paul how could you finish your course with joy? How could you be sorrowful yet always rejoicing? How could you pray and sing after being beaten and locked up in a dungeon? Because Paul was looking as Stephen, to the Author and Finisher of his faith. He wasn't even looking to his faith, but the Author and Finisher of his faith which was a gift of God given to him. We can count not our life dear to ourselves, fight the good fight of faith, finish our course, and keep the faith, and finish our course with joy through Christ through Whom we can do all things because He strengthens us. Do we think this was all recorded to glorify Paul or to frustrate us, no, but to show us that Paul a man of like passions as we, who said ***I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God Who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)***. His focus was on Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday, today, and forever!

**C. *2Timothy 4:8 Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.*** Here is a note of incentive and encouragement. When Christ comes there will be a crown of righteousness given which is intimately tied into the imputed righteousness of Christ, but also, to the Bema Seat in ***1Corinthians 3*** and the crowns being cast before the Lord in heaven for to Him be the glory, what we did was not in our own strength.

**1. *That day***, as mentioned in ***1Corinthians 3:13***, Satan does not want us to be able

to cast crowns full of gold, silver, and precious stones to the Lord, he would rather we have less and be saved so as by fire.

2. ***That love His appearing***, Christ's appearing—living for the future, not the present. 1Jn.2:28, abide in Christ, so we will be confident at Christ's coming, not shrink back in shame because we did not run the race, finish well, fight the good fight, kept the faith, finish our course with joy.

You may not accomplish what you would wish, but have you accomplished by the grace of God, the will of God for your life? You may not have made a million dollars, or become famous, or traveled the world over, or been engaged euphoric experiences that would send you into orbit emotionally, but will you know what is infinitely greater than all these put together, to hear Come ye, blessed of My Father, prepared for you, enter into your rest, well done thou good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord! That's what I'm talking about people! Hallelujah! Glory to God above!

Though we fail, God has not, and isn't about to start now, the Lord will finish His course, He will win the battle, but whose side are you on? Will you be on the winning side? Ah, you say, how can you win with so few, but, it will not be us, but the Almighty Creator Who fights for us, and none but fools will even think of resisting the King of Kings, the Lord of lords, the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the Ancient of Days, the Sovereign Lord Omnipotent Who reigns over the universe.

If you've ever sat by the bed of one who breathes their last breath, there is nothing so solemn and so sobering as that moment of deafening silence when no more breaths are taken. You and I will be in such a death bed one day, maybe today, our death bed may be in a car twisted in wreckage on a roadside, it may be in the marketplace, it may be on our jobs, or at school, while on vacation, on a battlefield, in a dark

prison, at home, it may be in our bed at home, it could even happen in church, but be sure it will happen. O may the words of the Apostle Peter ring into your heart, **Save yourselves from this untoward generation** before you go down to the fiery pit of a tormenting, dark, eternal hell of which the very thought of the unimaginable, awful terrors would make any thoughtful person's spine tingle with a quaking fear! I plead with you as an ambassador of Christ to be reconciled unto God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is the secret of finishing your course, your race with joy? It's all wrapped up in the Lord Jesus Christ, embracing His sinless life, His sacrificial death, His burial, His resurrection, His coming again, His eternal Kingdom to come.

Listen to young pastor from Zimbabwe just before being martyred for his faith in Christ: I'm part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I have the Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made—I'm a disciple of His. I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, my future is secure. I'm finished and done with low living, sight walking, smooth knees, colorless dreams, fabled visions, worldly talking, cheap giving, and dwarfed goals. I no longer need preeminence, position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity. I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean in His presence, walk by patience, am uplifted by prayer, and I labor with power. My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is heaven. My road is narrow, my way rough, my companions are few, my Guide reliable and my mission clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of the enemy, pander at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I won't give up, shut up, or let up, until I have stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up, and preached up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus. I must go till He comes, give till I drop, preach till all know, and work till He



stops me. And, when He comes for His own, He will have no problem recognizing me...my banner will be clear.

This man finished his course with joy, he finished well, how about you? Will you finish well? We all need to ask ourselves this question and have dealings with God over the matter after I pray and we have that moment of silence, if you are not saved from your sins, you will go out in fear and to hell, cry out the Lord Jesus to save you from your sins, look to that wonderful Saviour Who finished as the joy set before Him, like no one else has ever finished and has blazed the trail for everyone who would repent of their sins and believe and trust in Him and His work on the cross to save them from their sins. Who would reject that love? If you don't receive the gift, you reject the gift, and how it will torment and haunt your very soul that on this very day, you were told about your inevitable death and your sins and the judgment to come, and repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ Who came into this sin cursed world, to be despised and rejected of men, a Man of sorrows, well acquainted with grief, Who came into this world to save sinners, to suffer, to bleed, and to die for sinners so that they could have eternal life, and you were invited to come to Christ, and you declined the invitation!

Saved brother or sister, in this time of silence let us have some serious dealings with our God that we would finish well and finish with joy, first, for the sake of the well-deserving and all-loving God we serve, and then for the sake of those who we will leave behind one day. People give their whole lives to their work, to drinking, to drugs, to fame, until it literally kills them, they give their lives over to Satan for the destruction of their flesh, should we not have that same spirit of determination through the power of the Spirit to give our lives over to Christ even if it would mean dying for Him?

He emptied Himself and offered Himself a sacrifice for our sins, can we not empty ourselves and offer ourselves a living sacrifice for service to Him which is our reasonable service, anything less is unreasonable. Ah, yes, the love of Christ is so constraining, so inviting, so motivating, so full of wonder and amazing grace. Let this mind be in us that was in Christ



in that He emptied Himself for us, ***Psalms 22:14 I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. Isaiah 53:12 Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*** Let us empty ourselves for Jesus that He might fill us with His Spirit and we finish our course with joy to the glory of our great God and to brighten the day and brighten the way for our dear brothers and sisters in the faith and for poor sinners living in the darkness of sin.