

# Finishing Well

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## TRIBUTE TO BILLY

Q: Did you follow Billy Graham's crusade in NY last weekend?

It is incredible what God has done through him. He has preached to 210 million people in 185 countries, over 7 decades. He has known the last eleven presidents, back to Harry Truman. He worked with MLK and embraced civil rights before it was popular.

Billy is now 86 years old. He has prostate cancer, Parkinson's, and a broken hip and pelvis. He may move slower than he has, but he is still serving God with all his might.

- Asked if this was his last crusade, he answered, "It probably is, in New York. But I have also learned to never say never."

He got front page billing in Newsweek. The article concludes:

"As his own journey nears its end, he is sure and certain about the future. 'Do I fear death?' he asks. 'No. I look forward to death, with great anticipation. I am looking forward to seeing God face to face.'" (Newsweek July 4, 2005)

What an example to the world! Not just of peace and confidence in the face of death, but of faithfully serving God. He is running his race well, to the very end.

## PAUL PREPARES TO CROSS THE FINISH LINE

Second Timothy also tells of another great evangelist who was very near the end of his life. It was written by the Apostle Paul as he was in a Roman prison, awaiting execution.

- Paul had planted countless churches, brought Christianity to the gentiles, and wrote over half the NT.

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. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness... 2

*Timothy 4:6-8 NIV*

Like Billy Graham, he had no fear as he faced the end of this life, only hope. Paul and Billy also have this in common: They have both held their course, strong to the end, and finished well.

- That's what I want.

I want to reach the end of my life, having glorified God without faltering, and able to say, "I've fought the good fight, I've finished the race."

## ENVISIONING MY OBITUARY

Why am I thinking about my death already?

Last year, I turned 30. I had to face two facts: 1) I am an adult now, and 2) I am gonna to die. I don't know when, but it will sooner than I can believe.

- Few things give clarity like envisioning how you want your obituary to read.

Throughout history, countless men and women have started strong, but stumbled and fallen, or just pattered out before reaching the finish line.

That's not what I want. I want to be like Paul and Billy. When God calls me home, I want to be in full stride as I cross the finish line.

**Q:** Have you thought about how you want your obituary to read?

**Q:** How will you finish your race?

Granted, the finish line is closer for some than others. But none us know how long we have. Do you want to be remembered for just surviving or for serving until the end?

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE RACE

I don't need to elaborate on what it means to run this race well. It's the obvious stuff: Growing in relationship with and dependence on God, obeying Him, loving and serving others.

- The challenge is a consistent, lifelong commitment to these.
- How I can finish well, like Paul, like Billy?

In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote to a church in Corinth that had gotten off the course. In it, he shares three tips to successfully running the race and finishing well.

### TIP #1: KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE PRIZE

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. *1 Corinthians 9:24-25 NIV*

**Q:** What is the prize?

**A:** Salvation, yes, but also to reach the end of our race and hear our savior say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

Every believer will be welcomed into heaven. Every one of us will be graciously and lovingly welcomed home. But not every one will be told "Well done."

If any man builds on this foundation [of Christ] using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day [of judgment] will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. *1 Corinthians 3:12-15 NIV*

- In heaven, there will be many singed believers.

**Q:** Will I be one of them? Will you? Or will we finish well?

## **WELL LOVED**

Taken out of context, this can seem to say that we have to work to earn God's love or approval. But Paul is very clear that salvation is only by grace not works (Eph. 2:8-9).

- We cannot do anything to make God love us more.

Living a life pleasing to Him is a response to His love. The more I understand God's love for me, the closer I get to God, and the closer I get to God, more I want to please Him.

- Because I am well loved, I want to finish well.

And as we live a life pleasing to God, we learn it's to our benefit. The Holy Spirit shows us that a mediocre Christian walk is so far short of the life God wants to give us.

- Christ calls us to thrive, not survive.

The prize that drives us to finish this race well is not accolades on earth, not bragging rights in heaven, and it's not earning God's love.

- The prize is the pleasure of having pleased God.

## **TIP #2: KEEP PUSHING YOURSELF DAILY**

Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave... *1 Corinthians 9:26-27 NIV*

## **HOLY COASTER**

You've heard of holy rollers? I'm a holy coaster. Left to myself, I put forth the minimum effort needed to achieve the required result. But coasting always catches up with you.

I was one of those kids with a great metabolism, I eat what ever I wanted, never exercised, even worked at McD's and eat there every day, but only weighed 125 lbs. when I graduated.

I coasted on my metabolism. But it caught up with me, seven years and 80 pounds later. When I had my cholesterol check, it was high enough to warrant an alarmed call from my doctor.

- I am now paying for the bad habits of coasting.
- I have to fight to lose any and every pound.

## **A LITTLE EACH DAY**

Face it, we are all holy coasters. We put forth the minimum effort. Coasting won't cost us our salvation, but it will keep us from reaching the prize.

- Running this race and finishing well requires that we aggressively pushing ourselves to live a life pleasing to God.

This is work; it's good work, but work. There is no secret to this. It, too, is the obvious things. Spending time with God, fellowship with believers who push us to grow.

- We must cooperate with the Holy Spirit on a daily basis - He will guide us and empower us if we allow.

We should pray, "Help me grow a little bit today."

## **TIP #3: KEEP YOU FEET ON THE TRACK**

...so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. *1 Corinthians 9:24-27 NIV*

Being disqualified is a distinct possibility. It doesn't just mean walking away from God, though some have. It means giving up; sitting down on the track, waiting for God to call you home.

The Christian life is not a sprint, it is a marathon. It requires a commitment over the long haul.

- Finishing well requires perseverance over a lifetime.

“A lifetime” feels like a tall order, but a marathon isn’t completed by taking 55,546 steps. It’s completed by taking the first step, then the second, then the next and next.

Running the race and finishing well requires nothing more or less than taking one day at a time, one foot in front of the other.

- “There’s not much I can do forever, but there’s a lot I can do one day at a time.”

## **IT DOESN’T MATTER HOW YOU STARTED**

Those are Paul’s three tips for finishing well. Fifteen years after writing this, he would write another letter, in which he would “I have fought the good fight, I finished the race.”

Paul’s example can be overwhelming, but it also is very encouraging. He demonstrates that it’s the finish, not the start that counts.

- No matter how well or poorly we start the race, we can finish well.

You can start like Billy who became a Christian at age 16 and was preaching three years later. Or you can start like Paul who was persecuting Christians until his mid-thirties.

You could have grown up in the church or you may still be running from God now. Now matter how you started, you can still finish well.

- Keep your eyes on the prize, keep pushing yourself daily, and keep you feet on the track.