A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*Don’t Quit*”

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2 Timothy 4.6

There’s a big race this morning here in Waco. The Ironman triathlon competition. Hundreds of athletes including at least a couple of friends of mine will be swimming, biking, and running their way around the city. I’ve done a fair amount of running, but have never competed in an Ironman. The closest I’ve come is watching documentaries on the Ironman championships, hearing John Tesh’s melodious voice narrate the trials and triumphs of world-class athletes and big-hearted amateurs as they test the limits of their abilities against the quintessential endurance challenge.

And so, when Paul writes, ‘I have finished the race’ it’s the images of those athletes seeing the finish line come into their view that I think about. They’ve made it, after all they’ve gone through, the pain, injuries, suffering, loneliness, dark thoughts in their heads, now they know they’ve made it. It’s not just about the one who finishes first; it’s about the crowd at the finish line cheering with tears those who limp and sometimes crawl in long after darkness has settled in, having overcome everything to finish their race. Those are the best stories.

I have finished the race. The Apostle Paul isn’t any kind of athlete that we know about, but likes to use athletic metaphors for Christian life. So, like an athlete, he’s fought the good fight, and he sees the end of the race ahead of him. He’s older now, wiser, still with a fire in his belly, but it’s beginning to come close to the end for him. We have his words of challenge and blessing for those who come after him as he begins to see the end of his life in view.

This is no ordinary person coming to the end of his life; this is the apostle, missionary to the Gentiles, he who gave his life, his body, his mind, everything in service of the gospel. To see the courses of his missionary journeys on the map in the back your bible looks like seeing the tracking of someone who has run a lapped course over and over again. He endured so very much along the way. In 2 Corinthians, he says he was whipped five times, beaten with rods three times, shipwrecked, in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in, in hunger and thirst, in fastings, in cold and nakedness. This race he ran wasn’t easy at any turn. Yet he persevered.

Now he can say, “I am already being poured out like a drink offering, the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.

Not everyone had. Paul laments individuals he knows by name who have left the faith. Why? We don’t know exactly. Fear of martyrdom for some; some were swayed by false teaching; perhaps some, like Judas, decided what Jesus was about wasn’t what he wanted Jesus to be about so he turned away from him. Perhaps some just simply grew weary. Being a follower of Jesus wasn’t easy then.

It’s not always easy now. Being a Christian here, nowadays isn’t the most challenging test of faith that anyone has ever had anywhere. But if you’re a Christian in a place and time like this, your faith will be challenged, and it will be tested. Christians still make an easy target. You know this already of course. Your convictions will be mocked by people who do not believe in any God. Your convictions will be challenged by those who think it foolish why someone would make the choices you do with your money, your body, your time, your relationships. Just as potent are the internal challenges that come in waves: doubts, questions, unanswered prayers.

We may not share Paul’s adventurous story of shipwrecks and beatings, but we know what it’s like to have the ship of faith hit the rocks, and what it’s like to be beaten by the waves of doubt and discouragement. Compared to some of those life experiences, a literal shipwreck has its appeal.

The life of faith can be a very challenging journey, like a race that tests everything you’ve got. Will you be able to say with the apostle, “I have finished the race”?

The image of faithful living as a race speaks to me as someone who’s done a fair amount of running. I know what it’s like to find the dark night of the runner’s soul out there on the lonely streets. I know what it’s like to stand on the podium to celebrate a victory, and I know what it’s like to see the finish line, feeling not elation at accomplishment but relief that the thing is finally over.

The Ironman race, like I mentioned earlier, is a particularly grueling race. But there are even more challenging races out there for a few crazy people who attempt them.

One of them I want to tell you about because it not only is particularly sadistic, but because it has some echoes with the way life is. We don’t know where the finish line is until we’ve arrived there. Big’s Backyard Ultra is a 4-mile run in the hills of Tennessee. 4 miles. Once the bell rings, you have 1 hour to complete the loop. Then at the top of the next hour the bell rings, and the remaining runners have 1 hour to run 4 more miles. Then at the top of the next hour the same thing. And over and over and over, on the hour, runners line up to run 4 miles. How long can you keep doing this? That’s the whole race. And the thing is there’s no 2nd place. If you aren’t the last one standing, DNF will be listed by your name, the scarlet letters of the running community. DNF: Did Not Finish. You can run 200 miles, but if someone runs 1 lap more than you, you DNF.

It’s literally the race without a finish line. The race organizer wrote a reflection on one competitor who didn’t win, but he’s an image of the courage I’ve seen in some people in real life. After two and a half days . . .

“I don’t know where Gavin found the strength to answer the bell.  
and, as I watched his bowed and broken figure shamble out into the darkness,  
I wondered if I should stop him, but, if he had the courage to answer the bell,  
I felt like he deserved to finish on his own terms.

It was not that long before Gavin came staggering back into race headquarters.  
his buddies rushed to his side, and half carried him back to his chair,  
where he slumped, racked with sobs.

He might not have succeeded, but Gavin had met every challenge head on,  
and, faced with insurmountable obstacles, he had refused to back down.

Gavin won’t get any records or fame. He will be recorded as a DNF like everyone else, but he won’t go home emptyhanded. He will take home the knowledge that he has been to places that few will ever go and found in himself strength that few will ever know.”

This year’s race was last weekend. Maggie Guterl won, the first woman to win the race. It turns out she won the race not just on the 60th loop when her lone remaining competitor dropped out, but before the race even began. She had one mindset coming into it, “Don’t quit.”

It sounds almost too simple, but that simplicity is the key to the challenge. And to a lot of life. “[It] took out the decision-making process during the race,” Guterl said. “If you let the idea stew, you might drop. But, if you take this single-minded focus, you can just be confident that you’re going to win because if you don’t drop out, you win.”

She won, not just the “women’s world championship, the world championship of everybody. 60 hours, 250 miles.” Last woman standing. Like Paul, she fought the good fight, she finished the race.

Paul, the Apostle, the great missionary to the gentiles, the founder of churches, evangelist to the world, writer of much of the New Testament, St. Paul could have seen himself as the last-one-standing, the one who outlasted and outreached all the others who had been or ever would be. He could have like a famous boxer glossed himself, “I am the greatest.” He could have seen life like a competition to win or lose. But he didn’t. He didn’t see life as a singular competition or his faith as a lonely endeavor. We’re all in this he said. In Christ, we all win victory in him.

The victor’s crown is waiting for me, he said, for I have finished the race. But this crown is not only for me, but also for all who have longed for Christ’s appearing. It is for all who have held on when they wanted to give up, who have endured suffering in the name of Christ. The wreath is for all who have overcome their fear with faith, endured their long dry seasons of prayer with hope, and have met their enemies with love. The crown in this race is for all who have had the courage to answer the bell one more time.

It’s not just for one person. It’s for you and for you and for you. The victory crown is for everyone who endures until the end. For all of those who get knocked down but get back up. For those who think they can’t go around one more loop, or one more day, but somewhere find a strength that is not their own to persevere. The crown is waiting for you. It’s for all those who are abused for their faith, and those who are torn apart in their faith. It’s for all of those who resist temptation, and for those who gave in but repent and rise to battle another day. The crown is for all of those who lay down their own ability at the feet of Jesus, who wore the crown of thorns. It is him living in and through us that helps us endure one more step until we can stand no longer and then we rest in him who carries us when we can’t carry on.

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