

"Finishing Well"
Sermon Series on the Book of Acts – *The Way of the Spirit*
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
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(Acts 20:17-38)

Introduction.

One of the accomplishments I'm proudest of is that a number of years ago I ran a marathon. It was back in 2002, and it was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I asked the Lord to give me one marathon in my lifetime, and He gave it to me. And I'm not going to put Him to the test and ever try for another one! A friend of mine said to me, "Some people have bodies that were designed by God to run long distances. Yours isn't one of them, Peter!"

One of the problems I encountered was that during the training for the race I injured both of my calves when I got up to the 18-mile mark in the training. So I met with a sports medicine doctor who helped me develop a pain management strategy so I could at least run the marathon. We knew it wouldn't be pretty, but at least I could try to complete the race.

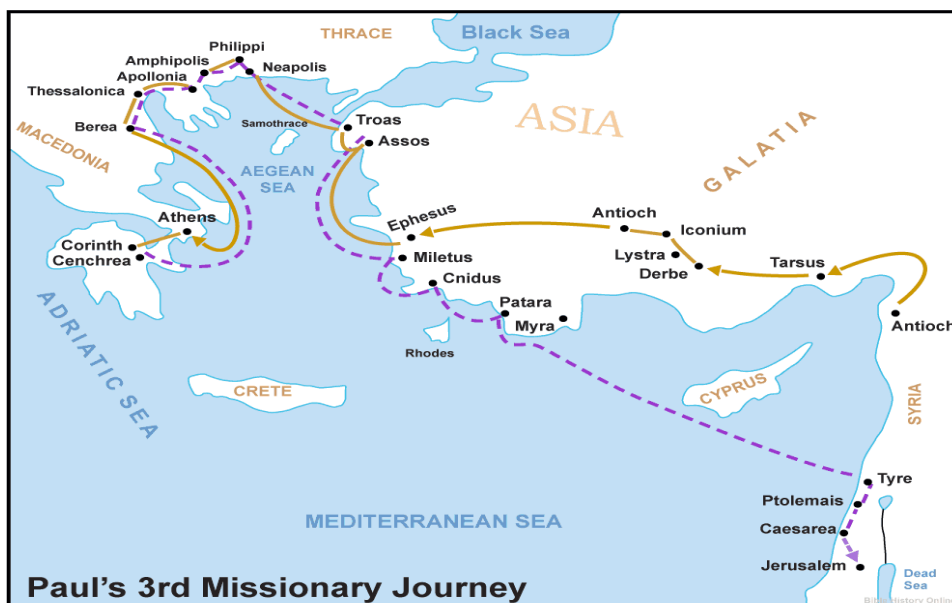
I wrapped both calves tightly with Ace bandages and compressed them even more with athletic tape. This would keep the muscles warm and hold them together when they went into spasm. I also took a bunch of ibuprofen before and during the race. And it worked. I was able to run the race even though I was in a good bit of pain, and I completed the 26.2 mile course of the Marine Corps marathon. It was exhilarating.

An interesting thing happened during the race. When I wrapped both of my calves, it looked like I was a double amputee and that I was running on artificial legs. So along the course people began to cheer when I ran by them. "Way to go! Keep it up! You're such an inspiration!" they would shout. At first, I thought it was because I was running so well and I must have had great form. But then I realized it was because of the wraps on my legs. Well, I couldn't exactly stop and explain what the situation really was, so I just accepted the encouragement and took it all in. It actually helped propel me to the end and complete the race.

I learned something very valuable during that whole experience. Anyone can begin a race, but it's only the one who finishes the course who wins the prize. Starting out isn't enough; finishing is what it's all about. Paul knew this to be true, and here in the Acts 20 we read of the

way in which he called himself and the elders of the church in Ephesus to finish well.

The Example of Paul. In this passage we find the apostle Paul completing his 3rd missionary journey. On his way from Macedonia to Jerusalem, he didn't stop in Ephesus where previously he had spent 3 years of his ministry.



Rather, he asked the leaders of the church in Ephesus to meet him at a place down the coast named Miletus about 30 miles away. If you've been following our study in the book of Acts, you'll remember that things didn't end very well in Ephesus for Paul. He had to leave the city after a riot broke out over some controversial remarks he made. It was probably dangerous for him to return, so he made arrangements to meet the elders in a town 30 miles away.

When Paul met up with his friends in Miletus, he gave what is recorded as the only speech in the entire book of Acts that is directed exclusively to Christians. All of the other speeches and sermons in the book of Acts were given either to Jews or Greeks who didn't know Jesus, urging them to come to faith or defending the truth of Christianity. The purpose of Paul's speech here was to defend himself as well as to encourage and warn the leaders of the church in Ephesus.

You may recall that a smear campaign had been launched against Paul in the city of Thessalonica after he left their community, because he was smuggled out of the city by night and hadn't returned. His critics inside the church in Thessalonica accused him of abandonment and a lack of sincerity. Something similar seems to have happened in Ephesus during the year or so since he had left that city. So he felt the need to defend himself and the sincerity of his motives, and he did so by reminding them of his ministry while he was with them.

Paul makes three claims in defense of his ministry in Ephesus. **First**, he says that **he had spoken the Word of God fearlessly**. Paul said, *"You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in the Lord Jesus. ...Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God"* (20:20,21,26).

Paul didn't shrink back from telling everyone the purpose of God's salvation. As a result his conscience was clear. As John R.W. Stott has written, "He was thorough in his teaching; he was thorough in his coverage, and he was thorough in his methods. He shared all possible truth with all possible people in all possible ways. He taught the whole gospel to the whole city with his whole strength."¹ Paul had been fearless in proclaiming the Good News of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Can you say that of your own life? Is your conscience clear that you have been faithful to tell your friends and family about your relationship with Jesus? Or have you been more of a "secret agent" for God; no one really knows you're a Christian. Is there someone today with whom God is calling you to share your faith?

The **second** claim Paul makes is that **he faced the future courageously**. *"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I do not consider my life as precious to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me..."* (20:22-24).

Paul's overriding concern wasn't that he survive at all costs, but rather that he might finish the race and complete his God-given task of bearing witness to the Good News of God's grace. His prophetic eyes looked beyond Jerusalem and the sufferings he anticipated encountering there to the mission visits to Rome and Spain he was still dreaming about. He was captive to the Holy Spirit, and in that confidence he was able to bravely face anything that the future might hold for him. Do you have that kind of confidence as you face the future? Paul reminds us to trust the Lord, and He will see us through.

The **final claim** Paul makes in his defense was that **he was determined to finish the race to which God had called him**. The image of finishing the race was a central image in several of Paul's writings. We see him use it elsewhere in his letters to the various churches (1Cor. 9:24; Gal. 2:2, 5:7; 2Tim. 4:7). I wonder if Paul had been a runner himself when he was young. Or maybe he was simply a fan of the great athletic games that were held in the 1st century AD. Perhaps he visited the stadiums where the great contests were held in antiquity. Paul takes this

metaphor of running a race and applies it to the Christian life. He didn't want to stop short of the whole course God laid out before him simply because it was getting difficult or tiresome. He wanted to finish the race.

The Boston Marathon is the oldest and the most famous of the long distance races in the U.S. In that marathon, at about mile 19, there's a very long gradual hill that is known as Heartbreak Hill. It's the place in the race when many runners hit "the wall", as it's called – a time when you feel like giving up because you're beginning to exhaust your physical resources and the course is just too difficult. When runners hit "the wall", they want to stop, they want to give up.

Many of us can relate to this idea of hitting "the wall" in our own lives. We've been following Jesus for a while, we've been at this Christian thing for some time, but now the climb has taken a difficult turn and we find ourselves exhausting our resources to keep on going. We want to stop. We want to give up. It's just too hard. God seems to be asking too much of us. We think, "Lord, how long?" "Why is this happening to me?" "I just can't do this."

Paul felt like that at various times in his life. In 1 Corinthians 11 he writes about all the hardships he faced while following Jesus. He experienced beatings, shipwrecks, betrayals, and hardships, but Paul kept on going. He fixed his eyes upon the goal set before him – to be faithful to Jesus whom one day he would see in glory. Along the way people said to him, "It's too hard, Paul. The sacrifice is too great. We need you too much." But Paul said, "I've got to finish the race. That's what God has called me to do."

This has been a difficult season for me personally, as many of you know. My wife Lorie is battling cancer. My brother Rob had a liver transplant a few months ago, and now, sadly, even though he was recovering well from that surgery and doing so much better, they discovered that the cancer which caused him to need a transplant has metastasized to his bones. He's probably going to die in the next few days or weeks. It's feels like a lot to handle emotionally and spiritually. My heart is heavy. There have been times when I've hit the wall.

Could it be that it's only when we hit the wall that we realize just how spiritually bankrupt we've really been all along? It's only when we exhaust our resources that we begin to lean on Jesus completely, because we come to understand there is no one else who can help us. And it's only when we hit rock bottom that we finally start looking up and looking to God.

There's a great sign along the route of the Boston Marathon at Heartbreak Hill. It says, "You are suffering in the footsteps of legends." It's a motivation to encourage you to remember that you're not alone in your struggle, and you are in the company of greatness whenever you hit the wall.

Is the race getting difficult for you, too? Do you want to stop and give up? As one who is there myself, let me say, to you and to myself, "Let's hang in there. Let's keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Let's follow the example of Paul, and let's keep going and trust that the Lord is with us. He will see us through to the end."

II. The Warning and Charge of Paul to the Elders.

Having looked back on his ministry in Ephesus and to his coming sufferings and separation from them, Paul now gives these elders his final charge. He didn't think he would ever see them again, and these words are his farewell address. There are three things Paul reminded them of in the course of his remarks, and these are words I would especially direct to the elders in our church today.

A. He reminded them of their duty. *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood" (20:28).* The responsibility elders have is not a duty that they have

chosen for themselves. Rather, it is an obligation for which they have been chosen and set apart by the Holy Spirit.

Paul reminded the elders in Ephesus first to keep watch over themselves, and only then over the flock for which the Lord had made them responsible. You can't do a good job of caring for others if you neglect the care and nurture of your own soul. You can't give away what you don't personally possess yourself. It's like the flight attendant says on the airplane before you take off, "If there is a loss of cabin pressure, put the oxygen mask on yourself before you try to help others." Elders, attend to the care of your own soul as you care for the people of God.

B. He reminded them of the danger. *"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!"*

(20:29,30,31a). Wherever truth stands strong, falsehood usually attacks. As I shared with you last week, there is a constant spiritual warfare that is going on in the world today, and the wise shepherd must be on his/her guard. Spiritual leaders need to be people of prayer and discerners of truth so that they can protect God's people from attacks both inside and outside the church.

Jesus Himself warned against false prophets, and He called them wolves in sheep's clothing. The challenge for the staff and officers of this church is to hold fast to the truths of Scripture and the Confessions of our faith in obedience to Christ and to protect the flock from false teaching.

C. He reminded them of his love. Through all of Paul's words of admonition, the dominant feelings of affection run deep. Paul really cared about these people, and his ministry among them had been a labor of love. In everything, he sought to live out the words of Jesus, which he quotes, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive"* (20:35). It's a quotation that interestingly does not appear anywhere in the Gospels.

Richard Baxter wrote a marvelous book back in 1656 entitled *The Reformed Pastor*. Listen to his words, and apply them to your own life if you're a leader in this church:

"Oh then, let us hear these arguments of Christ, whenever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless: 'Did I die for them, and will you not look after them? Were they worth my blood and are they not worth your labor? Did I come down from heaven to earth to seek and to save that which was lost; and will you not go to the next door or street or village to seek them? How small is your labor and condescension as to Mine? I debased myself to this, but it is your honor to be so employed. Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation; and was I willing to make you a co-worker with me, and will you refuse that little that lies in thy hands?'"²

Beautiful words written over 350 years ago – words that are as relevant to the leaders of this church today as they were to pastors and elders in Baxter's day. We are called to love this precious flock God has entrusted to our care, and ministry is a privilege and an honor.

When Paul finished speaking, they said farewell to one another. And they wept together. Such was the bond between them.

Conclusion/Application.

As we close this morning, I want to share with you the true story of Emil Zatopek. I think it speaks to the call to discipleship and how to finish well. In the 1948 Olympics held in London, Emil Zatopek won the gold medal in the 10,000 meter race, but he came in 2nd in the 5,000 meters where he lost by .2 of a second. The day after his loss, he began training for the 1952 Olympics that were to be held in Helsinki, Finland, and he was determined to have a different outcome. At that Olympics in 1952, the "bouncing Czech", as he was called because of his running style, won the gold medal and set world records in winning both the 5,000 and 10,000 meter races. Only three other men have ever won both events at an Olympic Games.

To the surprise of everyone, Zatopek had also secretly registered to run in the Marathon just a few days after his other victories. To capture all three events in a single Olympic was unthinkable. Sports writers called it "the impossible triple slam." Jim Peters of Great Britain, who was favored to win the Marathon, was asked what his strategy would be to defeat Zatopek. He replied, "I will run him into the ground with a fast pace."

When the race began, it wasn't long before Peters and Zatopek left the rest of the field, and it became a 2-man race. About the 10-mile mark, Zatopek edged up alongside Peters and said in broken English, "Pace too fast." Peters responded by saying, "No. The pace is too slow!" and he pushed ahead of Zatopek. At about the 15-mile mark, Zatopek once again pulled up alongside Peters and said again, "Pace too fast." Peters once again replied, "No. Pace is too slow!" and he pulled ahead. Then at the 21-mile mark, Zatopek once again pulled up beside Peters and said,



"Pace too fast," to which Peters once again replied, "No. The pace is too slow." But this time Zatopek answered, "You're right!", and he ran ahead of Peters and went on to win the Gold Medal and set an Olympic Record.

After the Marathon, Emil Zatopek was asked, "What is the key to your training? How did you prepare yourself for this incredible accomplishment?" He replied, "I run, and I run, and I run, until I feel like I can run no more, and *that's* when I begin my training."

Running the race of the Christian life is very much like that. It is putting one foot in front of the other, staying the course, and keeping our eyes on Christ, pushing past "the wall" and when we feel like we can't go any further, and drawing upon the resources of the Savior. It's coming to the end of our resources and learning that when we are weak the strength of Christ will be most evident in our lives. May God grant to each one of us the power of His grace to finish well.

Here is a final picture from the marathon I ran back in 2002 I want to share with you. It's of me after I finished the race. Do you see the smile on my face. I was exhausted, but the exhilaration of completing the race was overwhelming. The medal I'm holding says "Marine Corps Marathon, 2002. Finisher." Anyone can start a race. But it takes courage and commitment to finish it and to finish it well. Let's finish the race of living for Jesus Christ as well as we possibly can. Amen.

¹John R.W. Stott, *The Spirit, The Church and the World*, p.328.

²Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, pp. 121,122.