

## FINISH YOUR COURSE

- A. Introduction: For several months, we've been talking about the importance of not being moved by life's challenges. And, we've covered a lot of ground in these lessons. But consider this thought.
1. What are we not supposed to be moved from? When life's challenges move us from hope to despair, from confidence to uncertainty, from strength to weakness—what is the bottom line?
    - a. The bottom line is that we are not to be moved from our faith and trust in God. Perhaps you're thinking: That will never happen to me. I'll never stop believing in God. However, that's not the only way being moved from faith and trust in God expresses itself.
    - b. Faith and trust is more than believing in the existence and reality of God. We are supposed to live and walk by faith or trust in God (Rom 1:17; II Cor 5:7). Everything about us is supposed to come from a place of faith and should be an expression of trust in Him.
      1. Mark 4:35-41--When Jesus and His disciples encountered a deadly storm as they crossed the Sea of Galilee, the disciples were moved from faith or trust in Christ.
      2. They didn't stop believing in Him or cease to follow Him. But they had no confidence in Him, no expectation that He would help them. They had no trust. Trust is assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something (*Webster's Dictionary*).
        - A. By this point in time, Jesus' disciples had seen Him do some marvelous things. And He had assured them of God the Father's care for them. Yet all that went out the window in the face of their circumstances and the feelings generated by what they could see.
        - B. In fact, Jesus said to them: Where is your faith—your trust, your confidence in Me, [in My veracity and My integrity]? (Luke 8:25, Amp).
  2. In this lesson we're going to consider what it means to be moved from faith and trust in God, what moves us, and what we can do to keep from being moved.
- B. The apostle Paul has been our example of someone who was not moved by life's challenges. We've repeatedly referred to Acts 20:22-24 where Paul stated that, even though imprisonment and suffering awaited him in Jerusalem, he was not moved by it.
1. We've already discussed much about Paul's view of reality (or his perspective) when he made this statement. Let's add another element.
    - a. Acts 20:24--But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify of the gospel of the grace of God. (ESV).
    - b. In this statement, we see Paul's motivation as he lived his life—a motivation or passion that made him unmovable. There's a lot in this statement that we'll deal with in other lessons. But for now, note one point. Paul wanted to finish his course. Course comes from a Greek word that means a running, a race.
      1. Athletic games and competitions were a major part of life in the Roman Empire. The Romans had absorbed Greek culture, and the Greeks were known for their sports, particularly the Olympics. So, the people Paul preached and wrote to would have understood the imagery.
      2. Races involve a starting point and an end point. And you run to win or finish the race. Just before Paul was executed for his faith in Christ he wrote: I've fought a good fight, I've finished my course (same word), I've kept the faith. II Tim 4:7
  2. In previous lessons, we've made reference to a statement Paul made to a group of Christians who were under increasing pressure to abandon their faith in Christ. He encouraged them to run with endurance the race that is set before us. Heb 12:1
    - a. This Greek word translated race is a different word and it adds an additional element to what Paul was trying to express. The word literally means a stadium or place of assembly where games were celebrated. Note the context: Old Testament witnesses watch us as we run.

1. This word is also used figuratively or metaphorically to mean the struggle of Christian life, both the inward and outward struggles we all face.
  2. The word is not only translated race in Paul's writings, but also fight (I Tim 6:12); conflict (Phil 1:30); and contention (I Thess 2:2).
- b. When we give our lives to Jesus, we change directions and begin to go against the flow of this world (lessons for another day). Because we are going upstream we encounter many struggles. These struggles can potentially keep us from finishing the race. We face all these distractions which can drive us off the track or send us running back to the starting line.
1. Circumstances--Life in a sin damaged world is hard. There's a curse of corruption and death in the world, and things wear out and break. People make choices we don't agree with or approve of, yet we're effected by what they do. Life is a toil. Gen 3:17-19; Rom 5:12; Matt 6:19; etc.
  2. Emotions--The circumstances and pressures of life in a fallen world generate a range of unpleasant emotions in us—anger, fear, worry, disappointment, grief, frustration, etc.
  3. Satan--The devil and his fallen angels oppose us and attempt to steal the Word of God from us. Mark 4:15; I Pet 5:8; Eph 6:11,12; etc.
- c. Paul was determined to finish his race no matter what. He wasn't passive about it. He once again used the example of athletic competition to express his commitment to his goal. I Cor 9:24-27
1. v24,25--Athletes who run in a race run to win. So we should run to win. Every athlete who wants to win practices self control. They do it to win a temporary prize. We do it to win an eternal prize.
  2. v26,27--So I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step (NLT); I am no shadow boxer, I really fight (Phillips). I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified (NLT).
  3. None of life's struggles stopped Paul from fulfilling his passion to finish his race. Just before he was executed for his faith in Christ, his testimony was: I've fought a good fight, I've finished my course, I've kept the faith. II Tim 4:7
3. Before we move on, consider this thought. One of the themes we see in the New Testament is that believers are conquerors, overcomers who are victorious. Rom 8:37; I Cor 15:57; I John 5:4,5; etc.
- a. We have a lot of wrong ideas about what it means to be victorious in a fallen world, in part, because the Christianity that is preached today in the western world bears very little resemblance to New Testament Christianity.
1. Twentieth century principles of success and prosperity have been incorporated into much of the teaching. Therefore, we mistakenly think that victory means no problems. Overcoming means being happy and carefree. Conquering means that if we do encounter troubles, they end quickly.
  2. Consequently, on top of the struggles of life, many sincere Christians labor under the weight of: What's wrong with me? Where is the victory? How come I'm not conquering?
- b. Victory is staying faithful to Jesus. Conquerors recognize the distractions and aren't stopped by them. Overcomers run their race and finish their course.
- C. What does victory look like in a fallen world? Let's look at some details about what happened when Paul continued on to the city of Jerusalem (after Acts 20:22-24).
1. This is a very short summary: Paul eventually made it to Jerusalem. Unbelieving Jews from Asia incited a riot by claiming Paul had taken Gentiles into the Temple and polluted it.
    - a. Paul was taken into Roman custody. Because he was a Roman citizen, he was sent to Felix, a Roman official in the city Caesarea where Paul was held without a hearing for two years.
    - b. When Paul was offered a chance to be tried in Jerusalem, he appealed to Caesar (his right as a Roman citizen), and was sent on to Rome. Prior to setting sail, Paul perceived that the voyage would not end well. There would be much damage and hurt to property and persons. Acts 27

1. The ship's captain didn't listen to Paul and they set off for Rome. The ship encountered a horrific storm. It soon became clear that the ship would not survive.
2. An angel appeared to Paul and reminded him of Jesus' earlier words that the apostle would testify of Him in Rome (Acts 23:11). The angel assured Paul, that although the ship would be lost, everyone one on board would survive, and they'd end up on an island (Acts 27:21-26).
- c. Because this is a Bible story, it's easy for us to miss the impact of what this man went through.
  1. He was falsely accused, manhandled by government officials, arrested unjustly, confined for several years while political officials squabbled, taken on board ship as a prisoner, and endured a horrific storm on the sea. He was thrown into the ocean when the ship disintegrated and washed ashore on an island with barbarians.
  2. Yet Paul was not moved from his faith in Christ. He didn't stop believing in Jesus. Neither did he stop trusting the Lord or believing God's Word to him. He knew he would make it to Rome because Almighty God said so. Acts 27:24,25
    - A. Did Paul face any struggles as he went through this ordeal? Of course he did. He was and is a real person, just like you and me. What would you experience (see and feel) if you were in his situation?
    - B. Think of the physical challenges, not to mention the mental and emotional challenges. Add to that is the fact that the devil comes to try steal the word of God from all of us.
2. In an earlier lesson we talked about Christians in the city of Thessalonica. Paul preached the gospel, they responded and were converted to Christ. Persecution broke out and Paul had to flee the city.
  - a. Paul was concerned that they might be moved from their faith in Christ by the afflictions they were experiencing, so he sent Timothy back to them:
    1. To strengthen you, and to encourage you in your faith. (20<sup>th</sup> Cent); that none of you might be shrinking back (Rotherham); waver (Conybeare) be unnerved by your present trials (Weymouth); lose heart (Phillips). I Thess 3:2,3
    2. Paul reminded them that troubles are part of life. He then gave an important detail about what happens in the trials of life. The tempter comes to tempt us. The word tempt literally means to test, i.e. to endeavour, scrutinize, entice. I Thess 3:4,5
    3. The devil endeavors or attempts to influence you through thoughts (Eph 6:11). He scrutinizes or examines you to see how you respond which determines how he deals with you. (In other words, he knows what buttons to push.) He tries to entice or lure you into accepting and acting on lies. The point of discussing these examples is not to exalt the devil but rather, help us see the important of controlling what focus on in our mind, our attention on.
  - b. In the previous lesson we examined how the devil enticed Eve away from her focus on God and His Word. Consider how he tempted Jesus (tempt is the same word Paul used in I Thess 3:5). We could do an entire lesson on Jesus' interaction with the devil. But note the main point: Satan challenged God's Word to Jesus to move Him away from faith and trust in God. Matt 4:1-11
    1. When Jesus was baptized, God the Father spoke from Heaven and reiterated that Jesus was the Son of God. The devil came to Jesus when He was hungry (feeling something unpleasant in his body) and challenged that word (v2,3,6). When Jesus answered the first temptation with the Word of God, the devil misused scripture in his next temptation (Ps 91:11,12).
    2. Ps 2 is a Messianic psalm. In v8 the Father promises His Son the kingdoms of this world when redemption is completed. Satan offered those kingdoms to Jesus right now if you do it my way (Matt 4:8,9). Jesus responded by putting His trust in His Father's faithfulness.
    3. Note that the devil then left Jesus for a season. Luke 4:13--And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until a more opportune time (ESV).
- c. Paul would have had to deal with the same kinds of thoughts we all deal with: You won't make it to Rome alive. Look at the storm. Listen to the creaking ship. Feel the seasickness. After all, you fought against the Lord and persecuted Christians. You deserve what is happening to you. You

had it better as a Pharisee. You were never any good at anything. Why did you think this would be different. Nobody cares about you. After all the sacrifices you've made, you deserve better.

1. Paul had to focus and keep his attention on Jesus and His Word to Him. Note that in Acts 27:25, when Paul recounted to the ship's crew what the angel told him, Paul exhorted them to be of good cheer.
2. Remember what it means to cheer yourself. It means to encourage yourself with the reasons you have hope despite how things look and feel. You have hope because you have the Word of the God of hope.
3. Victory for Paul in this circumstance didn't mean him somehow being able to make it all stop. Victory meant going through it and staying faithful to the Lord, continuing to believe God's Word to him, continuing to trust Almighty God to be Who He is.
  - a. Remember what trust is. Trust is assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something (*Webster's Dictionary*).
  - b. We gain that assured reliance or trust as we look at Jesus, the Living Word, through the written Word, the Bible. We become persuaded of His goodness, His reliability, His faithfulness. We become assured of the hope we have in and through Him.

D. Conclusion: We still have a lot to say about not being moved, but consider this thought as we close.

1. In previous lessons, we've also discussed Paul's instructions to the Hebrews, Christians under pressure to abandon Christ, to abandon their race and not finish their course.
  - a. Paul exhorted them to hold fast their confidence to the end (Heb 3:6) and hold fast our confidence steadfast to the end (Heb 3:14).
    1. Confidence means the ground of confidence, assurance, guarantee, or proof. It is the quality of confidence that leads on to stand under, endure, or undertake anything. Almighty God and His faithfulness is the ground of our assurance that what He has promised, we will see.
    2. Hold fast means to hold fast in one's mind and heart. Circumstances, emotions, and thoughts (from your unrenewed mind and the devil) will come to steal God's Word, God's promise.
  - b. Be like Paul who, like an athlete, kept his body (including his mind and emotions) under control so that he didn't end up disqualified for the race he was running.
2. It's not how you start the race. It's how you finish the race. Do whatever you have to do to come to a place of assured reliance on God. Do whatever you have to do to stay faithful to the Lord, to continue to believe what He says no matter what you see and feel. Run your race! Finish your course! Lot's more next week.