

## Finish Strong!

“However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace”  
(Acts 20:24, *NIV*).

**P**aul relates the Christian life and ministry to a boxer, soldier, runner, workman (laborer), and farmer. This lesson will look at the Christian as a runner.

Let's start by putting on our thinking hats. Imagine you have completed life on this earth.

1. What would be your last words to your family and loved ones?
2. What would be the last message that you would preach in the church?
3. What would be the words that you would have on your gravestone?
4. What would be the scripture you would want to be remembered for?

“For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: 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” (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

### Finish the Race

The Olympics feature the world's best athletes—men and women dedicated to excellence. One of the events, the marathon, is a test of perseverance and speed. The man that first ran the race was a soldier, Philippides. He ran two hundred kilometers in two days to get military help. He returned in time to join the fighting. Someone was needed to run to Athens to warn them that the Persian army was going to attack the city. Philippides ran twenty-six hilly miles, fully armed, from Marathon to Athens, to deliver the news. He was exhausted and managed only to say, “Nike!” before he collapsed and died. “Nike” stands for “Victory is ours!” As Christians we are assured victory. The Lord will see us through!

The slogan of the Olympic Games is “Citius, altius, fortius.” It is a Latin phrase that means, “Swifter, higher, stronger.” It also represents what our Christian calling embodies. These games began in Greece nearly three thousand years ago. In ancient times, special people were charged with protecting the Olympic flame and making sure it never extinguished. Torches were lit at Marathon and would be passed, like a baton, from one relay runner to another. The flame represents “the light of spirit, knowledge, and life.” By passing the flame from one person to another, the torch relay signifies the handing down of the fire from generation to generation. As Christians, we must pass the torch of truth to a new generation.

The year—1968; the occasion—Olympics; the place—Mexico City; the event—the twenty-six mile Marathon. The favorite was a runner from Ethiopia. A sustained fracture forced him to

drop out of the race. Another Ethiopian, Mamo Wolde went on to win the gold medal. An hour later, as remaining spectators were leaving, they heard sirens. All eyes turned to see a lonely runner, wearing Tanzania colors, make his final lap around the track. The crowd exploded into applause. The newspaper reported, "Today, we have seen a young African runner who symbolized the finest in the human spirit, a performance that gives meaning to the word courage."

The runner was asked, "Why did you continue to run when you were alone, wounded, and knew that someone else had won the race? Why didn't you quit?"

He responded, "My country did not send me 7,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 7,000 miles to finish it."

That is the way it is with us. God did not send us to begin the race (only) but to finish the race. It is important to do our best for God.

We often remember how a person finishes the race and not how he starts. Moses was not permitted to lead God's people into the Promised Land. He was disobedient. He struck the rock when he was told to speak to it. He messed up.

Falling down does not mean that you are out of the race. Get up again! "For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again, But the wicked stumble in time of calamity" (Proverbs 24:16, *NASU*).

We cannot quit. "And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

"If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small" (Proverbs 24:10).

"No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven" (Philippians 3:13-14, *NLT*).

The course has hills—obstacles. Obstacles are something we see when we take our eyes off our goal. Paul overcame many obstacles. The word "race" comes from the English word "agony."

Christianity is a test of endurance. Paul tells us to "endure hardness" (2 Timothy 2:3); "endure afflictions" (2 Timothy 4:5); "endure grief" (1 Peter 2:19); and to "endure unto the end" (Matthew 24:13).

We may get tired on the race course but need to keep running the race. We shall win the prize if we faint not (Galatians 6:9).

You think you've got problems. Take a glance at Paul's troubles.

"They say they serve Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in jail more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled many weary miles. I have faced danger from flooded rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the stormy seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be Christians but are not. I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food. Often I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of how the churches are getting along" (2 Corinthians 11:23-28. *NLT*).

"We have been beaten, been put in jail, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food. We have proved ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, our sincere love, and the power of the Holy Spirit. We have faithfully preached the truth. God's power has been working in us. We have righteousness as our weapon, both to attack and to defend ourselves. We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. We are well known, but we are treated as unknown. We live close to death, but here we are, still alive. We have been beaten within an inch of our lives. Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything" (2 Corinthians 6:5-10, *NLT*).

That does not sound much like the prosperity message that we often hear.

"That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death" (Philippians 3:10).

Steve Farrar in *Finishing Strong* quotes research that only about one of ten who start the Christian ministry race will cross the finish line.

"Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth? This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (Galatians 5:7-9).

Farrar asks us what measures we are taking to ensure that we will be one of the ten. He encourages us to practice Psalm 101:2-3.

"Keep a close watch on yourself and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right, and God will save you and those who hear you" (1 Timothy 4:16, *NLT*).

Keeping the faith is a daily decision. It requires discipline. Paul said, "I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway" (1 Corinthians 9:26-27). Preserving truth is a daily choice too.

"Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding" (Proverbs 23:23).

"Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

I want to remain conservative enough to stay with the old truths and liberal enough to use new methods. Someone has advised that we should never remove a fence unless you check to see why it was there in the first place.

"Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set" (Proverbs 22:28).

Erosion is not obvious. It happens over time. We need to conserve the truth. This word means that we should safeguard or preserve something.



"Stay on the path. Take no shortcuts. It causes erosion."  
(Sign on Mountain Trail)

It is always sad to hear of this declaration: "For truth is fallen in the street" (Isaiah 59:14). We must do all possible to prevent truth-erosion.

We cannot put confidence in tradition for the Bible warns, "Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye" (Mark 7:13). It has been said, "What is popular is not always right; what is right is not always popular."

Carlton L. Coon, Sr. in his Bible study series *Take Root* states, "What men are taught determines what they believe. What they believe determines what they do. What they do determines their destiny."

Ed Cole once said, "A person's beliefs hold the greatest potential for good or harm in life." What we believe about our salvation matters much when we consider our future destiny. We need to adjust to the truth of God's Word. If someone says something that is wrong, and then a thousand people say that it is correct, it is still wrong.

## Study Questions

1. How does Paul picture or relate the Christian life and ministry? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. What is the slogan or motto for the Olympics and what does it mean? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. What could the Olympic torch and flame symbolize for the Christian? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. From a Scriptural standpoint, comment on the importance of finishing the race. \_\_\_\_\_

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5. The Christian race is popularly viewed as one of prosperity and ease. What does the word "race" actually mean? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. Compare the popular view in question five above with what Paul experienced in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. What similarities or differences do you find? \_\_\_\_\_

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7. What was Paul's desire as expressed in Philippians 3:10? \_\_\_\_\_

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8. According to Steve Farrar out of ten that begin the Christian race, how many will finish?

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9. What are you doing to ensure that you finish the race? \_\_\_\_\_

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10. Quote Proverbs 23:23. \_\_\_\_\_

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