

Finishing Well (2 Timothy 4)

Introduction:

We come to the last of four messages on 2 Timothy. It has been a wonderful privilege to open the Word of God to you these past few weeks. I trust that there have been some fresh insights about God, about yourself, with a few very practical ways for you to live your calling with greater joy and for God's greater glory.

In chapter 1 we saw how the fulfilling of one's calling will happen through difficulty, and in chapter 2 we saw that to continue well in one's calling will require grace, endurance, and faithfulness. In chapter 3 we saw that Paul wanted Timothy to understand that the primary means of fulfilling one's calling is by avoiding ungodly people while adhering to the truth of Scripture. We have heard Paul's exhortations to Be Bold, Be Strong and Be Wise. Now in this last chapter we will look at the Big Idea of:

Finishing Well in Your Calling Requires Knowing and Fulfilling your Priorities.

And the final exhortation to Timothy and us is to:

Be Sober!

When our family moved to Colorado in 1996, after our 7 years in Singapore, I took up a hobby I could not do in Singapore. I began a quest to climb the 55 mountains that exceeded 4200 meters. We had lived near Bukit Timah Hill during our years in Singapore and regularly enjoyed our hikes up this highest hill of 163 meters but it did not prepare me for climbing in Colorado.

Between 1997 and 2011 I climbed several mountains each year during our summers when weather conditions were best. I learned the importance of preparing well physically, using the correct gear, and almost always going with fellow climbers. On September 8, 2011 I reached the top of Pikes Peak in Colorado Springs, my final 14er. I had completed a goal; I finished well.

1. To End Well is a Worthy Pursuit. Paul begins this chapter with a sense of solemnity and urgency. He knows that he is nearing the end of his earthly life. He reflects back on what was of most importance to him and shares this with his son in the faith in hope that he and others will seek to finish well.

As you know, in Paul's original writing there were no chapter breaks. So, 4:1 is really a continues from 3:17 where valuing and living the Bible is taught. Every believer should recognize that our lives are in full view of God. He is the ultimate judge, He will return, and how people live for His Kingdom will make a difference in finishing well.

Leadership expert and former seminary professor Dr Bobby Clinton studied in depth biblical leaders to learn who and how people finished well. A sad realization is that only a small percentage of people recorded in the Bible actually finished well. Many aspire but few attain.

Most people sometime in life will deviate from the healthy and godly path. By the time someone is older, poor life choices over finances, power, pride, sex, family, etc., will weigh them down. This kind of end can be avoided so let us look first at how to finish well.

Word Study: This concept of finishing well is the point of 4:7-8, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.”* The word for finish means just that, to bring to an end, complete, accomplish. We see how Jesus understood finishing well in John 17:4, *“I have glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do.”* Jesus lived His calling. He came and did what the Father had sent Him to do. Jesus could say just before dying in John 19:30 *“‘It is finished!’ And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.”*

Paul stated his life intention to finish well in Acts 20:24: *“But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.”* Paul lived his calling. Finishing well will never happen without intentional effort along with divine help. If it is our desire to honor God for the salvation and the abundant life He provided, Paul tells us how.

On October 22, 2018, pastor, author of *The Message* translation of the Bible, and sage, Eugene Peterson, died finishing well. One of his books where the title could not have been better chosen is called, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. (1996) The first edition of the book was linked to perseverance and the revision was linked to discipleship. The two are really inseparably. Today many speakers and writers are focused on relevance, whereas Peterson was first and last focused on faithfulness. Finishing well cannot happen without faithfulness.

Transition: Remember when Paul wrote this second letter to Timothy he was in his 60s having lived a life with much difficulty. 2 Corinthians chapters 6 and 11 give us the account of his hard life. His words are not those of a discouraged, broken old man. There is no despair, no defeat, no cynicism, and no fear as he faces imminent execution. His calm assurance is all the more startling when you consider his circumstances. He was in the Mamertine Prison in Rome. Even the worst of our prisons today would be like luxury in comparison to the Mamertine. Paul’s cell was a dark, damp dungeon, reached only by a rope or ladder from a hole in the floor above. He had no windows, no lights, no toilet, no furniture, and no running water.

As Paul sat on the hard floor in the cold darkness and enduring stench, his circumstances outside were not encouraging either. Many seemed to have turned away from the apostle, and even from the faith, following false teachers. Paul had labored for the past thirty years to preach the gospel around the Roman Empire, but at this point, it was at best a tiny sect, scattered here and there. Paul was not accomplished by any standards of today. He was not famous, he owned only his clothes and a few books, and his spiritual authority was recognized by few.

And yet, the man was clearly at rest, confident in the way he had spent his life, and calmly assured as he faced death by decapitation. What does the apostle have to teach us about finishing well? When it came down to the end, it was 1) his sense of faithfulness to his calling from the Lord and 2) his meaningful relationships that remained.

2. Paul's Model and Final Words: Paul starts this chapter by using nine imperatives, five in verse 2 and four in verse 5. In 4:1-2, Paul tells Timothy to preach the word—being ready and able at all times. In 4:3-4, he shows why preaching the word is of utmost importance—tough times were coming and people must be prepared. Then comes 4:5, **the key verse in the book:** “*But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.*” Clearly he was saying to Timothy, take life seriously, be SOBER.

We can see in this key verse an outline of the entire book: “*But you, be sober in all things* (the message of chapter 4), *endure hardship* (the message of chapter 3), *do the work of an evangelist* (the message of chapter 2), *fulfill your ministry* (the message of chapter 1). Let's look closer.

V2: First, Preach the Word. The Bible is worth preaching and hearing. God does not promise to bless my words, nor my words about His word. He promises to bless His Word. Thus it is important to take in scripture (Hand Illustration). We need to know the Bible well enough to discern when it is being twisted as well as neglected. Like the Bereans in Acts 17:11 who did not just accept everything Paul taught them, we should take the biblical message with such sobriety that we study on our own to become personally convinced of what is taught.

V13: Second, Study the Word. Even as an old man facing certain death, the apostle has not lost his interest for studying biblical truth. His model presents a standing challenge for all of us to be hungry students of the Word of God. Paul's desire to be brought scrolls shows his heart to never stop reflecting on God's words and nor stop learning. Let us not get side tracked with the many distractions pressing upon us to the neglect of knowing and living the Bible!

V6-8: Third, Live the Word. How could Paul look so positively about his pending death? Here are four ways:

1) Paul viewed his sacrifice as an offering to God. He had endured hardship and fought well. Sacrifice is a relative term, isn't it? Either Helen Roseveare or Elizabeth Elliot (both godly missionaries who suffered much) said: “If we truly understood the sacrifice Christ endured for us then it would remove the word sacrifice from our vocabulary.” What do we consider sacrifice? How can we put our inconveniences in a better perspective?

2) Paul knew he was heading to heaven, a mere departure from earth. Just over a year ago my mother died. Lisa and I were in India when we got word that she had a sudden turn for the worse. I was able to get on a flight within 24 hours and made it to her bedside 30 hours before she passed. About five years ago my mother did not want to talk about death because of its uncertainty but then she came to a place of peace, actually anticipating release from her deteriorating body. It is possible to approach death positively. Does the idea of departing to be with Christ cause you fear or peace? If fear, remember Paul's words from 1:12 that he was confident that when he entrusted his life to God it would be guarded to the end. Count on this!

3) Paul had a clean conscience of having run his race well. He fulfilled his calling and had kept the faith. We must know our calling and endure faithfully to ensure that we finish well? Our life 'race' is not a sprint but more like a marathon. When I was able to complete a marathon in 2004

at age 50 I knew my goal, 42Km, and had trained for about 5 months, and I endured through what is called ‘hitting the wall.’ At around 35Km and made it across the finish line. You might be ‘hitting a wall’ now in your faith and in need of endurance. When do you most feel like dropping out of the race? What encourages you to keep going at those times? Don’t give up or give in. Keep faithfully following Jesus across the finish line.

4) Paul knew that reward awaited him. It has been said that God is no man’s debtor. Jesus told the disciples, *“Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life.”* (Mk 10:29-30) As mentioned during the message on chapter one, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Whether a reward motivates you or not, God provides special blessing for those who finish well.

Transition: Paul intended to influence Timothy to finish well first by his example. He lived a disciplined life (fought the fight), a directional life (finished the course), and a doctrinal life (kept the faith). Second, we learn the high value of relationships when we near the finish line of life.

3. Paul’s Priority on Relationships. Paul mentions people by name 17 times in this chapter. Later in life, relationships are what is of highest value.

Bronnie Ware is an Australian author whose calling is as an end of life care nurse, working exclusively with people who are 3 to 12 months from death. She made a habit of asking them about their greatest regrets, and she heard the same five regrets time and time again. By studying these regrets, we can make good choices so we don’t fall victim to them ourselves.

They wish they hadn’t worked so hard. Working hard is a great way to impact the world, to learn, to grow, to feel accomplished, and sometimes even to find happiness, but it becomes a problem when you do so at the expense of the people closest to you. Ironically, we often work hard to make money for the people we care about without realizing that they value our company more than money. The key is to find a balance between doing what you love and being with the people you love. Otherwise you’ll look back one day and wish you’d focused more on the latter.

They wish they had expressed their feelings. Many are taught as children that emotions are dangerous and that they must be bottled up and controlled. This usually works at first, but boxing up your feelings causes them to grow until they erupt. The best thing you can do is to express your feelings. Though it’s painful to initiate, it forces you to be honest and transparent. Regretfully, I kept emotions suppressed until I was about 53 before learning how to recognize and express them in a healthier way. I still struggle but am doing much better.

They wish they had stayed in touch with their friends. When you get caught up in your weekly routine, it’s easy to lose sight of how important people are to you, especially those closest to you. Relationships with old friends are among the first things to fall off the table when we’re busy. This is unfortunate because close friends bring you energy, fresh perspectives, and a sense of belonging, in a way that no one else can.

They wish they had let themselves be happy. When your life is about to end, all the difficulties you've faced suddenly become trivial compared to the good times. This is because you realize that, more often than not, suffering is a choice. Unfortunately, most people realize this far too late. Although we all inevitably experience pain, how we react to our pain is under our control, as is our ability to experience joy. Learning to laugh, smile, and be happy is a challenge at times, but it's one that's worth every ounce of effort.

Transition: So from Paul we learn to Be Sober in order to fulfill our calling and finish well. We should have a healthy perspective on life—our fight or race—no matter how old we are. We should progressively grow in our value of people, recognizing that God loves all and may have us to be His instrument of blessing. Know your calling, finish well!

Summary/Conclusion: 2 Timothy is a book about Legacy. How to finish well is worth thinking about when young but especially relevant as we get older. For what will you be remembered? What will we pass on? What will be written on your grave marker or what will people say at your memorial? In fact, it can be a valuable exercise to write what you hope will be said at your memorial, and then seek to live up to it. John Newton, who I referred to in the last sermon, at the age of 82 in poor health said, *“My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior!”* Here are a few final thoughts on practical ways to finish well today:

- Inspire others not far behind to finish well—it will help you to do so also.
- Help others see their legacy contribution, what they are especially good at and called to.
- Be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and allow God to speak through you with spiritual authority.
- Identify those you can mentor and reproduce spiritual life.
- Most of all, cultivate your relationship with Jesus and fulfill your calling to God's mission.

Overall in the Second Letter to Timothy we have learned:

1. Be Bold so you can endure hardship and faithfully fulfill your calling.
2. Be Strong knowing that the times are evil and seek to live a holy life.
3. Be Wise by studying, living, and communicating biblical truth.
4. Be Sober depending on God's grace to finish well.

As a young Christian over 40 years ago I learned this simple poem. It speaks to me today about valuing the time I have remaining.

When as a child I laughed and wept, Time crept.
When as a youth I played and talked, Time walked.
When I became a full grown man, Time ran.
When older still I grew, Time flew.
Soon I shall find while traveling on, Time gone.

Thank you again for the privilege to share with you these thoughts from God's Word that are so relevant for us today. I have been richly blessed in my preparation and preaching. May we live well, continue well, and finish well. Amen.