

**The Triumphant Epitaph of Paul, Part 2**

Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:7

Code: 55-25

May I invite you now to turn in your Bible again to the wonderful fourth chapter of 2 Timothy in which we find ourselves studying God's Word? Second Timothy chapter 4, particularly we are looking now at verses 6 through 8 and taking our time as we move through these verses because of their great importance to us.

One of my favorite calls to commitment was written years ago by Theodore Roosevelt. I have a plaque with this calligraphed on it which sits in my den on a cabinet as a reminder to me. Roosevelt wrote these words: "It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, whose strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again because there is no effort without error and shortcoming, who does actually try to do the deed, who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion and spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the worst if he fails at least fails while daring greatly. Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checked by failure than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in a gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat," end quote.

I don't want to be caught in that gray twilight. I want to know what it is to dare great things and to see glorious triumph become a reality. And I believe the Apostle Paul was just such a man with just such a commitment. Paul lived his life doing great things in the power of God. And in the two epistles that we know as 1 and 2 Timothy, the Apostle Paul passes on to Timothy the challenge that was the challenge of his own life. He calls Timothy to be committed to the cause of Christ, to be totally committed to that cause.

Now in unfolding his heart we have gone through chapter after chapter after chapter and we have read the passion of Paul. As we come to chapter 4 and verses 6 through 8, this is really Paul's final word to Timothy. Oh there are a few things in verses 9 and following that have to do with some practical details but in terms of pouring out the passion of his heart for ministry it comes to an end in verses 6 through 8. And in fact, this is the last chapter Paul ever penned that is included in the inspired text. So this is Paul's swan song. This is his final statement and it is a summary of his own life in his own words. Here he writes his own epitaph. Let's look at verse 6. "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering and the time of my departure has come. 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."

There are the words of God's greatest servant, words which give personal testimony to his own life. He faces death, the imprisonment in which he is now incarcerated will end in his martyrdom and he knows that. It's a hard time to leave the church. He had poured his life into the church. And in the years since the church was born in the Gentile world, difficult times have come, doctrine has been corrupted, ungodly behavior has found its way into the church, unwholesome, unbiblical and unspiritual leadership has arisen. It's not an easy time for Paul to leave but his time is up. The thirty or so years of his ministry are ended and he faces death. He faces death not fearfully, and not regretfully but triumphantly, but not without a strong desire in his heart that Timothy would carry on in his place. While he longs to be with Christ, as he said to the Philippians which is far better, he still longs for the growth of the church, knowing it is time for him to be with Christ he desires that Timothy would take up the leadership which he himself had carried out. He is confident about the faithfulness of his own life and expresses that in the verses I just read and he wants Timothy to live an equally faithful life in taking his place.

So, there's a note of triumph here and yet there's a great note of concern. As you look then at verses 6 to 8 we can conclude that here is a man's look at a faithful life, a man's triumphant anticipation of being with the Lord. Here you have his own testimony and his own epitaph. But I also believe that inherent in his giving this is the longing of his heart that Timothy would catch the vision of living a similar kind of life so that he could die with a similar kind of epitaph. This then is not just a summary of his own life but an encouragement to the life of Timothy and to every other servant of God who has ever read it.

As I pointed out to you last Lord's day, these three verses are divided into three tenses...the first one deals with the present tense, I am already being poured out as a drink offering. The second verse deals with the past tense...I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. The third verse deals with the future tense...in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness. As Paul looks at the present tense of his life he sees the close of his life and he is ready. As he looks at the past tense, he sees the course of his life and he was faithful. As he looks at the future, he sees the crown of his life and he will be rewarded. Last Lord's day we talked about the present tense, the close of his life and he's ready. Next Lord's day we'll talk about the future, the crown of his life and he will be rewarded. But this morning we want to talk about the present of his life...pardon me, the past of his life, looking at it from the course of his life and the great reality that he was faithful, he was faithful.

But let me just touch base with point number one in verse 6. As Paul looked at the present tense of his life, he could see that his life was being poured out as a drink offering. I told you last Lord's day that that is a very vivid expression. Going back to Numbers chapter 15 when God instructed the

people of Israel upon entrance into the promise land about the sacrifices they were to give, He instructed them that making a full offering to God had three parts. There was a burnt offering, an animal, there was a meal offering, that is grain and oil mixed, and then finally there was a libation or a drink offering, the pouring out of wine. A sacrifice or offering to God then had three parts. First there was the animal sacrifice, then the meal offering and then the drink offering. When Paul says I am already being poured out as a drink offering, he is simply saying this is the last act in my spiritual sacrifice. I have already offered my life as a living sacrifice, a burnt offering...I have already offered my energies and my time and my talents, as it were, as a meal offering and now I will literally pour out my blood in death as a drink offering. This then is his final act of sacrifice.

He is eager. He doesn't even call it death. He calls it departure in verse 6. That very lovely word is so rich in meaning. Do you remember last time I said that the word departure is used of unyoking an animal so that its labor is over and it is free to rest? It is used of releasing a prisoner, taking his chains off of him so he is free to move. It is used of loosening the ropes of a tent when you arrive at a permanent home, no more setting up and tearing down tents. It is also used of untying the ship's ropes that keep it to the dock and Paul looked at his life as having been loosed from earth to sail into the harbor of heaven. So he would rest from his labor, he would be free from the chains and bondage of this life. He would never again have to loose the tent because he would be living forever permanently in the Father's house and he was leaving the shore of this life for the last time to anchor in the harbor of heaven. He was ready...he was ready. He said to the Philippians, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is...what?...is gain...is gain."

He was honored to die for Christ. Scars I mentioned last week were second-class marks of a faithful servant. Death was the first-class mark. He had the scars but he was also willing to die the death. So he viewed the present tense, saw the close of his life and is ready.

Now for our study this morning let's come to verse 7 and look at the past of his life, the course of his life and see that he was faithful. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." To put the words in the Greek order it would read this way, "The good fight I have fought, the course I have finished, the faith I have kept." In each of those three sentences there is a perfect tense verb which describes completed action in the past with continuing results indicating that all the way along he had fought the good fight, all the way along he had continued in the course until it had been finished, all the way along he had kept the faith.

As the great Apostle looks back on his life, there are no regrets. There is no sadness. There is no remorse. There is no sense of unfulfillment. There is no feeling of incompleteness. He does not see the smallest thing having been left undone. What God called him to do, he did. What God equipped him to do he did. What God providentially gave him opportunity to do, he did. And so he faces death with a wholly satisfaction. He faces death triumphantly in the memory of a life work completed.

I can't think of a more glorious way to leave this world than with the confidence that you have done all that you were called to do. I can't think of anything more wonderful than to yield up your life in death with a total sense of having finished what God gave you to do and been faithful to it. That's the way to go, that's the way to leave, that's the way to come to the end of your life. Now somebody at this point says, "But how can we live so that that kind of triumphant joy in the face of death could belong to us? How can I live my life so that it ends like that, so that I can come to the end of my life and say I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith? How can my life end with such triumph?"

I believe in those three sentences you have the answer. And I want to give you several things to think about that I believe can guarantee to you and to me that we can finish our life with the same note of triumph that Paul did.

First of all, will you please note, I will give you five principles. Principle number one, these are necessary for a triumphant finish...these are necessary if we're going to complete our life in the way that Paul did. Principle number one, he recognized that he was in a spiritual struggle...he recognized that he was in a spiritual struggle. Please note that he says in verse 7, "I have fought the good fight." The word "fought," the verb, agonizomai, the word "fight," the noun agon or agona, I have agonized the agony is a transliteration. The term is used in different ways in the New Testament, that is to describe different kinds of struggles. But keep this thought in mind. The underlying common denominator, every time these terms are used, agonizo and agona is that they express excessive effort and energy expended in some kind of contest. That's the root idea of the word. It depicts some kind of struggle, some kind of contest. It could be a boxing match, it could be a wrestling match, it could be a race. It's used in all those ways in the New Testament, but the underlying idea is that there is excessive effort required and expended in some kind of contest, conflict, struggle. And you'll remember that he talked about running a race in 1 Corinthians 9 and running in order to win. You'll remember that he talked about boxing and he says I'm not like someone who beats the air, or shadow boxes, I'm serious and I strike my opponent. And you remember also that in Ephesians 6 he says we wrestle not against flesh and blood but principalities and powers and the rulers of the darkness of this world, spiritual wickedness in the heavenlies.

You see, the Apostle Paul realized that he was in a struggle. He was in a contest. He was in athletic combat for victory and victory would be gained only by maximum effort. I personally believe that really in the world only the people who are able to compete successively succeed. There has to be a driving compelling within the heart of a person to win in order for their life to really count. And I don't mean by that that you necessarily focus on competing against someone else, but if you're to be successful in the spiritual dimension, you've got to see your life as a struggle against which you must compete. Who is the enemy? William Hendrickson wrote regarding Paul, "It had been a fight against Satan, against the principalities and powers, the world rulers of this darkness in the heavenlies, against

Jewish and pagan vice and violence, against Judaism among the Galatians, against fanaticism among the Thessalonians, against contention, fornication and litigation among the Corinthians, against incipient gnosticism among the Ephesians and Colossians, against fightings without and fears within and last but not least against the law of sin and death operating within his own heart," end quote.

It's always a struggle. And you're battling your own flesh and your own sin and your own ignorance and your own laziness and your own lack of priorities. And you're battling against those things that pull you off to do good things that aren't the best things. And it's only as you compete successfully against that with the sense that you are in a struggle, you are in combat and you must win that that you're going to come to a triumphant end. No one will ever make the maximum effort in ministry who doesn't see the reality of a great spiritual struggle that demands supreme commitment and maximum effort. And that's not just true for Paul and Timothy or for me, it's true for you. If you understand that you are in a spiritual struggle for the advancement of the Kingdom of God, for the advancement of the cause of Christ, you understand that you are in that kind of struggle and you don't give a maximum effort, then that's just a revelation of the spiritual state of your apathetic heart. It's a struggle. It's a warfare every day. Every single day there is a front on which the struggle goes on...constantly. Paul says to the Colossians in chapter 1 verse 29, "I labor to the point of sweat and exhaustion, the verb means, striving according to His power, always agonizing, always working, always laboring." To the Philippian believers in chapter 1 he says, "I..I want you to conduct yourselves in this manner, standing firm in one spirit with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel," then he says, "don't be alarmed by your opponents," in verse 28. And in verse 30 he says, "Expect the same kind of conflict you've seen me endure." Spiritual life is war, spiritual life is an athletic contest that goes to the people who make the maximum effort. If you want to come to the end of your life victoriously, it takes a maximum effort, it can't be a part-time indulgence. You can't fritter your life away in trivia and come to a triumphant end and be able to say I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. It's a life commitment to the spiritual reality of conflict and struggle. We are in a demanding contest that takes all the energy and all the fiber of your being all the time to accomplish God's goals.

Please notice a word that I want to draw to your attention in verse 7. Not only does he say I have fought the fight, but he calls it the good fight. And that takes us to principle number two. Principle number two is this, he not only recognized that he was engaged in an unending spiritual struggle but he recognized also that the cause for which he was engaged was noble. That's principle number two. The cause for which he was engaged was a noble cause.

Now please take that word "good," it's the word kalos in the Greek, it could be translated beautiful. It could be translated profitable. It would be right to translate it excellent, or delightful or honorable or distinguished. But my favorite word to use as a synonym is noble...noble. That sums it up. You see, Paul saw the fight as a noble fight. He didn't say, "I fought that dumb fight...I fought that ridiculous

unending tiring boring fight...I fought that debilitating defeating fight.....I fought that noble fight." He had a tremendously elevated sense of the cause in which he was engaged in his life. It is a stately word, the word noble, and it is a noble cause for which we fight.

Paul writing to the Philippians in chapter 2 and verse 19 said, "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition." He wanted to send Timothy to Philippi, get a report, have Timothy come back and tell him. He said, "I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare for they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus." And that indicates to me that the rest of the folks who didn't seek after the interests of Jesus Christ didn't know how noble that cause was and how ignoble their own interests are. I mean, where are you giving your life? Men and women have given their lives for many causes, but none is as noble as the cause of Christ. None is as noble as the advancement of His glorious Kingdom. Paul was literally consumed with this so that in Philippians 3 he says, "Whatever things were gained to me, those I have counted loss for the sake of Christ. I count...verse 8...all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them but manure in order that I may gain Christ." It's all nothing but garbage to me, and rubbish, the whole world of stuff. And he had a lot of credentials. He had a lot of things that men would prize. He counted it all garbage and gave it all away for the cause of Christ.

It's a noble cause, beloved, it's a noble cause. There's nothing like it...nothing like it. In 1 Corinthians, the last chapter, chapter 16, again Paul referring to Timothy says, "He is doing the Lord's work as I also am." What a marvelous commentary on his life. He is doing the Lord's work, he's giving himself to a noble cause. In 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 19, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation, therefore we are ambassadors for Christ. What a noble cause! What a noble calling!

And so we are to look at our life as a struggle. We are involved in a spiritual struggle in a spiritual contest. We can never let our guard down, we can never rest, in one sense, from the struggle and yet we are bouyed(?) on, encouraged and literally catapulted into it because of its nobility. We are fighting for such a noble king, such a noble cause. We have a high and holy and a heavenly calling, says Scripture. And I do believe that the men and women who come victoriously to the end of their life and who face death the way Paul faced it with confident triumph are those who engaged life as a struggle and who saw it as a noble struggle, worthy of all they had.

Now for Paul it called for great courage, giving up everything, tremendous courage. But he just went to the Lord for his strength. Carl Baker wrote some years ago, "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." That's what courage is. Course is fear that has said its prayers. You commit your soul to God for His safe keeping and courageously live and die, if need be, for the noble cause. Courage born of confident faith in God compels us to a maximum effort in the struggle. When you and I accept

the reality that we're in that life-long struggle with sin and the flesh, the world, devil, demons, souls of men we understand that's going to take total commitment. And when we see that this struggle is the noblest of all struggles in the universe, we certainly ought to be able to make that commitment. I mean, look at your own life and ask yourself...am I really giving my life for the cause of Christ? Do I know what my spiritual gift is? Do I know how God has gifted and equipped me? Do I really want to give all my energies and all the time and talent that I have and am able to give to the cause of the Kingdom? Or am I wasting my life...so much of it?

There's a third principle that I want to draw to your attention and it's brought to us in the second sentence of verse 7, "I have finished the course." I have finished the course. The third principle is this, he recognized the need to avoid wandering and have the self-discipline to stay on course. He recognized the need to avoid wandering and have the self-discipline to stay on course. This is so instructive, beloved. There's two things that can get somebody off course. If you're going to finish your course, you've got to stay on course. You can't finish in the time God gives you to finish if you're running all over somewhere else. It's almost as if, you could look at it this way, God gave you a moment to be born in His Kingdom, and that's when the race began. And God has ordained a moment when you enter His presence and that's how much time you have to run the race. And if you intend to finish the race that He has defined for you to run, you've got to stay on the course because all the time that you spend off the course is lost to the race. And what may happen is the end may come before the finish comes. And so the point being that if you're going to finish the course, you must recognize the need to avoid the wandering and have the self-discipline to stay on track. That's just basic.

Many people start out on course and they get off. You say, "Well, John, what gets off...what gets us off course? How do we get deviated away?" Well, I think there are two things that tend to do that. By the way, the word "course" here is *dromos*, means an athletic race. Sometimes we talk about a *cycladrome*(?), or some kind of *drome* that comes from that word, a track. How do we get off the track? How do we get off the course? Two things generally, I might just draw to your attention, Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1 and 2, would you look at that with me for a moment? Hebrews 12:1 and 2. Now the Apostle who wrote this, the instrument of God whoever it was, encourages us in the race of faith, verse 1, to lay aside two things. First he says lay aside every...what?...weight or encumbrance, and the sin which does so easily entangle or beset us and then we can run with endurance the race that is set before us. I believe there are two things that slow you down in the race. Two things that divert people off the course. One is encumbrance, two is sin. They can't therefore be the same thing. What is encumbrance? That is simply unnecessary baggage. You don't run a sprint in an overcoat. You don't run a mile carrying your luggage...not if you're running in a track meet. There are some things that aren't necessarily immoral, aren't necessarily unrighteous, they're unnecessary. And let me tell you very honestly, this is a personal testimony, the toughest thing in the life of the servant of God is to spend his life staying on the track that God has gifted him and put him on and not wind up getting all kinds of baggage into his life which diverts him all over the place. And it is a battle,

believe me...it is a battle. I think especially it's a battle in my case because I tend to accumulate so many things and to keep my mind and my heart and my focus right straight ahead and know that God gifted me and called me to preach and teach His Word and that's what He wants me to do and not try to run all kinds of operations and do all kinds of other things, that's just weight, that just bogs me down. I know what it is that God wants me to do and it's a question of battling to have the self-discipline to say no to those things and yes to the track that's ahead of you.

And the second factor is sin. People get off course and sometimes get off course and totally explode into small bits and people never to run again because of moral evil. The two things that get you off track so that you can't finish in the time God gave you is encumbrances unnecessary baggage that you divert into and sin...and sin. And I would daresay that for every servant of God who explodes in a moral disaster and is out of the race, there are probably ten who got off the track because they were diverted by stuff that was inconsequential to the real vision and their real giftedness and calling of God. Paul knew that he had to avoid the wandering and have the self-discipline to stay on course. And it goes all the way back to the principle of Acts 6. Look, said the Apostles, we can't wait on tables, we must give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word and you get some guys to do that. That's focus...that's focus, never deviating from the course.

In Acts chapter 20 the Apostle Paul articulates, I think, the kind of focus that he had when he says, actually starts in verse 22, "Behold, bound in the Spirit I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city saying that chains and afflictions await me." All I know is I'm going to get chained up when I get there. "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself in order that I may finish my course." That's the whole point. I'm staying on course, chains don't bother me, bonds don't bother me, prison doesn't bother me, death doesn't bother me and I'm not going to do all that other stuff that isn't God's calling. And if a man can keep his focus clear and his life pure, if a woman can keep her focus clear, her life pure, he or she can finish.

Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? Do you know how God wants to use you in His church? Do you know how God wants to use you with His people? Are you giving yourself to that wholeheartedly? Is your focus clear?

There's another key to this thing in Hebrews 12:2, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. If you want a perfect example of someone who stayed on course, who is it? Jesus...you know, He never ever deviated from the track? He said, "I only do what the Father shows Me to do." He said things like My hour has not come, I can't do that now. Never deviated from the track, never got side tracked into some other enterprise, always on track, always on course, always doing only the will of the Father in the perfect timing of the Father, nothing more, nothing less. Furthermore, He never deviated morally, did He? Never. Perfect holiness, on track. That's why you want to keep your eyes on Him.



Now it's hard sometimes to do that. Peter's a classic illustration. John 21, Peter finally gets his act cleaned up and the Lord confronts him and he says, "I love You, Lord." And the Lord says to him, "Follow Me, Peter, it will cost you your life but follow Me." Peter takes probably three big steps, turns around, sees John, says, "What about him? What about him?" And I'm sure in some exasperation the Lord says, "Look, if he lives till the Second Coming, it's none of your business, you follow Me." Focus, keep it clear. If you want to go through your life and end where God wants you to end, having finished what He gave you to finish, you've got to realize you're in a struggle which demands maximum effort all the way, there's no time to let up, no time to let up. You've got to realize the nobility of the cause in which you are engaged and you've got to recognize that it is essential for you to keep clear your calling. And I would venture a guess that most Christian people really don't have any idea why they're here or what they're supposed to be doing for the Lord. And it's not because He wouldn't want them to know. It's because our lives get filled up with so much useless stuff.

I've always loved Rudyard Kipling's expression of the essence of a self-disciplined life. It's secular but it's on target. Listen to what Kipling wrote. "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you, if you can trust yourself when all men doubt you but make allowance for their doubting too, if you can wait and not be tired by waiting or being lied about don't deal in lies, or being hated don't give way to hating and yet don't look too good nor talk too wise, if you can dream and not make dreams your master, if you can think and not make thoughts your aim, if you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same, if you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken twisted by knaves or made a trap for fools, or watch the things you gave your life to broken and stoop and build them up with worn-out tools, if you can make one heap of all your winnings and risk it on one turn of pitch and toss and lose and start again at your beginnings and never breathe a word about your loss, if you can force your heart and nerve and sinew to serve your turn long after they are gone and so hold on when there's nothing in you except the will which says to them hold on, if you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue or walk with kings and not lose the common touch, if neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you, if all men count with you but none too much, if you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run, yours is the earth and everything that's in it and what is more, you'll be a man, my son."

I like that line, "If you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run...yours is the earth and everything that's in it." The focused life. I remember as a boy reading about Ted Williams, the great hitter. It has been said through the years that he probably had the greatest powers of concentration of anyone who ever played baseball. And I read the fascinating account from some who were on his team that when he would be at the plate to hit, they would throw firecrackers at his feet and he had such incredible ability to concentrate on what he was doing that he would not hear them go off. Focus, concentration...it belongs to the one who wins. It belongs to the one who stays on track, the self-disciplined focus. The one who ends his life knowing the joy of triumph in a finished work is one who has stayed on the track and maximized his opportunity.

And that leads to a fourth principle that's inherent in this that I believe we need to understand. If you're going to finish where you need to finish at the end in triumph, you like Paul must recognize the need to treasure time. Paul recognized the need to treasure time. If you're going to finish the job just as the years of life run out, then you have to run against the clock. We all have to run against the clock, just like in a race the clock is the thing...time is the thing. Watching the news last night after I was home late, I noticed that they were showing the little clips from some of the speed skating and one man had lost by fractions of a second because at one point he missed one step and dropped one arm down for a brief moment. By the time he got it back up he was finished for winning a medal. The smallest minutest loss of time....do you treasure time? Do you like Paul said in Ephesians 5:16 redeem the time because the days are evil? Do you buy up time? Is time precious to you? Or do you waste time? Does the world go by, the days go by, the hours go by, the minutes go by without consequence? If you're going to finish, you've got to run against the clock. I only have so many breaths, my heart only has so many pumps and when the last one is there, that's it. Time is a precious thing. I want to be sure, and I know you do if you're thinking seriously about it, that you've taken time as a treasure from God, maybe the most treasured thing that you and I possess and filled it up with all that God would have. So basic.

Paul says I have finished the course. How did you finish, Paul? I finished because I considered time. I had to fill every moment of my time with the maximum effort. William Barclay writes about this particular imagery of finishing the course, "The battle of marathon was one of the decisive battles in the history of the world. In it the Greeks met the Persians and if the Persians had conquered, the glory that was Greece would never have flowered upon the world. Against fearful odds the Greeks defeated the Persians and won the battle of marathon. After the battle a Greek soldier ran all the way day and night from the battle to Athens with the news. Straight to the magistrates of Athens, he ran. Rejoice, he gasped, we have conquered. And even as he delivered his message, he fell dead. He had completed his course and done his work and there is no finer way for any man to die," end quote.

Today the marathon that we know is a tribute to that soldier. Its distance is supposed to be the same distance as that soldier ran. And he ran his life out so that he finished, gave his message and died because he made the maximum use of time. He gave the maximum effort for the moments that he had. That's the way to live your life. Run full speed until you reach the goal, deliver the message, finish and die. But you have to give the maximum effort along the way.

I used to run track and the coach used to say, "If you have anything left ten yards past the finish, you didn't give your all...you didn't give your all." How can you live so as to have a triumphant conclusion? How can you live so as to have joy in the face of death? How can you live so that you know when you come to the end you've done the work? One other principle, principle number five...he says that third sentence in verse 6...verse 7, the third sentence there is, "I have kept the faith." Here is the fifth principle. He recognized that he was fulfilling a sacred trust regarding the Word of God. He

recognized that he was fulfilling a sacred trust regarding the Word of God.

This is the controlling element of everything, folks. The reason we are committed to the warfare is because the Word of God calls us to that. The reason we understand it to be a noble cause is because the Word of God defines it as such. The reason we want to run with self-discipline and finish strong is because that's what God's Word calls us to. And the reason we want to treasure time is because God tells us to do that. You see, the underlying element here is the Word of God in all of this but there's a thought here that I want you to capture. The faith refers to the revealed Word of God. "I have kept" is the verb guarded, I have guarded the revealed Word of God. In other words, in all my running, in all my struggling, in all my conflict, in all my labor I have been always conscious of the sacred trust of the Word of God, to obey it and proclaim it and never compromise it.

In chapter 6 of 1 Timothy, do you remember verse 20? "O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, guard it because some have professed and gone astray from the faith." Don't do that. In 2 Timothy 1:14, "Guard through the Holy Spirit which dwells in us the treasure which has been entrusted to you." The faithful servant of the Lord through all that lifelong effort will guard the holy sacred Word of God, earnestly contending for the once-for-all delivered to the saints faith, Jude 3 says. No matter how difficult, no matter how often attacked, no matter how much persecution comes, there is an unwavering and obedient commitment to live and proclaim God's Word...God's Word. That's the treasure of all treasures.

Do you live life for the Word of God? Is it that precious? Is it that treasured? If you're going to finish strong, you have got to be a person who is committed to the treasure of the Word of God.

I read a beautiful story this week about a missionary in France who was telling about a little French girl who came to Christ and she was blind and had been blind from birth, knew how to read with Braille and so someone got her the gospel of Mark in Braille. And she was so enamored with the Word of God that she read it continuously and the account said that she eventually wore calluses on the fingers of both hands so that she couldn't read it anymore because she had desensitized her fingers. And then came the almost unbelievable report that in an effort to get back to the Word of God she cut the skin off the ends of her fingers hoping that that would make her fingers more sensitive. It did just the opposite and permanently scarred her fingers so that she was not able to read. Just as that had happened, the story goes, she bent down to sort of kiss goodbye the pages of Scripture only to find out that her lips were more sensitive than her fingers and spent the rest of her days reading the Scripture with her lips.

What kind of an appetite do you have for the Word of God? Would you cut the skin off your fingers? Would you read it with your lips? Is it that precious to you? Paul lived and breathed for the Word of God. If you're going to come to the end of your life and finish strong, it isn't just effort, it's effort under the direction of the Word of God. Do you understand that? It's not just a struggle, it's a struggle

controlled by the Word of God. It's a cause defined by the Word of God. It's a course laid out by the Word of God. It's time used in line with the Word of God.

So what are the necessary factors if you're going to end like Paul ended? You must recognize and be committed to the reality of a spiritual struggle all your life. You must be committed to the nobility of that cause. You must live a life of self-discipline so that you stay on course and don't get diverted by the encumbrances and the sins. You must hold precious to your heart the value of time. And you must live always under the authority of God's Word. And then you can finish the way Paul finished.

I want to close with a wonderful, wonderful testimony. Listen to this. In 1904 a young man graduated from high school in Chicago, Illinois. He was a member of Moody Church and his pastor was R.A. Torrey. His name was William Borden, and if that sounds like a familiar name, it is because he was the heir to the Borden dairy fortune. He was worth millions even in 1904. For a high school graduation gift, his parents gave him a cruise around the world. He went to Hong Kong, went through all of Asia, even found himself in Egypt, toured through the Middle East, went across Europe visiting the capitals of Europe. As he wrote home in the process the tone of his letters began to change. He began to accumulate an incredible burden and passion and compassion for lost people. He had seen millions of them without Christ. One letter said, "Mom, I believe God is calling me to be a missionary." Another letter said, "I'm sure God is calling me, I'm going to give my life and prepare for the mission field." That was not the family plan. He was the most gifted of all the children. He was the one that they desired to run the family business.

But after the cruise he returned home and he spent four years at Yale University preparing for the mission field. After that he went three years to seminary, further preparing for the mission field, seven years of training. During his time in college and seminary, he gave away his fortune. And as he was preparing to go to the mission field, he took his Bible, opened the back cover and wrote two words, "No reserves." In other words, I have nothing but trust, I've given away all my reserves, I'm going in complete faith that God will supply my needs, no reserves.

He wanted to live by faith. He began to pray about where God would want him to go and his heart was moved toward China. So he decided that God had called him to China and particularly to a group of Muslims that were living in China. He announced to his family that he was going and that he would be leaving very soon. Just prior to leaving his father became very ill. In fact, his father was near death. The family came to him and said, "You can't go, we beg you to stay, you have to stay, you're the only one who can run the family business." By now, of course, these seven years had passed and he was a mature young man. They said, "We will give you your father's office, we will give you all the money you want, whatever it takes." They promised him cars and everything a young man could ever dream of. His brothers and sisters came to him and pleaded because they were all somewhat dependent on the continued success of the business. And in his biography it says that he said, "I can't do it, my life is committed now." And again he opened the flack of his Bible and wrote two more

words, "No retreat." No reserves, no retreat.

He said God has called me and I'm going. And he sailed for China. On the way going through the Mediterranean from the east coast to the United States he stopped in Egypt. He had been there before. And while he was in Egypt he contracted Cerebral Meningitis and was dead in one month. Never reached China, never reached a mission field, never became a missionary. All that preparation, all that effort and he died.

When they found his Bible after his death, they opened it again to that back flyleaf and this is what they found. "No reserves, no retreat," and just before he died he wrote, "no regret...no regret." He never got there but he lived his life to the maximum of dedication to the Christ he loved. And if that was to be the end, then that was God's choice, no regrets. That's the only way you want to end, isn't it? With no regrets. Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, whether You would give to us a long life as You did to Paul, or a brief life as You did to William Borden, we would like to end the way they did with no regrets...no regrets because there was no retreat and there were no reserves except trust in You. What a testimony. Lord, help us to so live that we can come to the end of our days and say I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have guarded the faith. I gave my whole life in a noble cause with a maximum effort, stayed on track, treasured time and preserved the Word to the end. That's the prayer of my heart for my life and the life of every person who names Your name. Father, help us as a church to be committed to this, to fill up what you give us with our commitment at a maximum level so that we can sign out no regret...no regret. We long to know the heart of Paul and to live the very reality of the statement "for to me to live is Christ," help us to be so committed. We pray in His name. Amen.

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