

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
September 2, 2012**

2 Timothy 4:7-8

When the Race is Over

Hymns: 230 – 216 – 214 – 311 – Closing: 417

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Every year, *Sports Illustrated* runs a special issue during the early part of the summer titled, "Where Are They Now?" Writers are sent all over the world to track down athletes who at one time achieved a certain amount of fame or notoriety. They track down legends, one-time wonders, and scapegoats and they find out what happened after their career was over. It is very interesting to find out what happens for athletes when it is all done. And the stories are all across the board. They tell stories of trouble, charity, and success. An athlete's life can turn in many different directions when the race is over.

This morning as we conclude the *Spiritual Olympics*, we consider the end of the race. And the big question is what awaits the runner at the end of the race that we call life? The truth is that for many, many people in the world, that question delivers a huge question mark. Uncertainty awaits at the end of the race. So many people have no clue what will come, or they refuse to even think about that day. They are like the athlete who refuses to believe that their career will ever come to an end, so they make no plans. They live in the moment, they live for this life, they live as if this will go on forever. But the reality is that the race will end. This life will come to a close.

And there are very real results at the end of life for each and every person.

The real result for way too many people in this world will be eternal loss. Their uncertainty in this life about the afterlife will not change the reality of what awaits them in eternity. Hell is a very real place, created for the devil and all those who have no use for God and his Son. It is a place that is described as a fiery dungeon, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Yet, whatever type of terrible picture that comes into your head when you think of what hell might be like does not even begin to compare to the reality of what it actually is. And that is, because none of us could even fathom what hell is truly like. We couldn't begin to grasp what a place that is completely separated from God and his presence would be like. Even in the darkest places of this earth, God is still there, watching over the world and the people that he created. In hell for eternity, many people will experience what they have tried to convince themselves is truth: God will be absent. And it makes me shudder to even consider a place without God, a place where evil knows no bounds.

But the reality is that many people, even many people we know, will experience that place. And to be honest, that can be a tough truth to handle. And I don't just mean for those who have hell in their future. It can be tough for us as well.

As I force myself to think about the reality of hell and how truly terrible it is, and as I think about the reality that so many people's races will end in that dark place, it can be difficult to accept. And it can lead to doubts. Could such a place as this really exist? Could it really be worse than even the worst that my mind can imagine? Is it truly the place where billions and billions of

people will spend their eternity? Is this really where so many will find themselves after the race? As you think about the reality of hell, it can seem unfair. It can seem a bit extreme. And I can understand why so many people don't believe that such a terrible place could be real.

But then I remember that this terrible reality has a cause, and it is a dark and ugly cause. Hell is real because sin is real. And the hard, but true reason that so many people will be in hell is because they run the race breaking all the rules that God laid down. All those people that will be in hell will have no excuse when they are faced with the reality of judgment before God. And as we think about the sinful way that so many people run the race, let's not just point the finger outward and deceive ourselves. You and I often run the race in the exact same way as all the other people in this world. We often run in such a way that it probably seems as if we are trying to attain hell. And that realization of the way we are put together with the reality of what gets a person to hell should fill us with fear. Our statistics leave us way short of the qualifying standard for heaven, they should leave us in hell for eternity.

And yet, when I look out at you runners, I don't see people who are filled with fear. I don't see people who look terrified about what is waiting for them after the race is over. Instead, I see people who know what the Apostle Paul knew as he was coming to the end of his race. And it speaks to the other real result that awaits some people at the end of the race. This is what he said to Timothy in some of the last recorded words that we have from Paul, **"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing."
(2 Timothy 4:7-8)

Paul knew that another result was waiting for him when his race was over. The very real result that awaited Paul at the end of his race was eternal victory. He knew that a crown of righteousness was waiting for him in the real glories of heaven. Though Paul was a man who broke the rules and fell way short of perfection, he could speak with great confidence about what was waiting for him at the end. And that end result is what drove Paul through the tough times of life and it was what inspired him to continue running forward at all times. The reality of a crown of righteousness in the glories of heaven

And that reality can fill us with hope as we look to the time when our race is over. We can look forward to the same end result as Paul. Heaven is real. And heaven is beyond what any person could ever hope for or imagine. We could never fathom a place where sin cannot be, we cannot fathom what God's unveiled glory might be like. The glory of heaven is too wonderful for this sin-filled world, but it is a reality. And it is our reality, because the assurance of our eternal victory is the same as it was for Paul. The reality of that crown of righteousness waiting for each of us at the end of the race is made certain because of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to this earth and he ran the perfect race. He died a sacrificial death on the cross for each and every sin. He rose from the dead to prove his victory. And the glory and honor of victory awaited him at the end of the race as he sat down at the right hand of God the Father.

And now he waits to give each Christian runner who believes in what he did that sign of victory. He would give the eternal

crown of victory to Paul when his race ended and he will give it to each of us. And what a great comfort that is. As we run the race, what waits for us after the race is over is fully dependent upon what Jesus did for us, and not what we have done or not done for God. Knowing that Jesus has accomplished the victory already, and that he is simply waiting to give us the crown changes completely how we run our race. Peace, freedom, confidence, thanks! Those feelings will define the life of the Christian runner.

And as we look to the day when our race is over, Paul ends by reminding us that there are many, many Christian runners who will share in the victory with us. What a wonderful thought that must've been for the apostle to think about. As he wrote these words, he was all alone. He sat in a lonely cell waiting for the day when his execution would come. The visitors had dried up. The friends had gone out into the world to share the Gospel with others. It would've been very easy for Paul in those last days of his life to doubt that he would ever share joy with his friends again. Yet, Paul rejoiced in his last days, not just about the crown that was coming for him. No, he rejoiced about the crown that was waiting for every single one of his Christian friends. By God's grace, we are part of that group that Paul looked forward to receiving his crown with. And what a truly remarkable sight it will be when every Christian runner is gathered together to receive their crowns of righteousness and victory. As we think about that glorious day, I hope that the reality of the crown of righteousness and the glories of heaven give you motivation. Fight the good fight! Finish the race! Keep the faith! And then, on that great day when your race is over, on that great day when you stand before God, you will receive the

crown, Christian runners, you will receive the eternal crown of victory! Amen!