

# Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA August 26, 2012

Acts 20:24

## Finishing Strong

1. ***"The Wall"***
2. ***To Finish the Race!***
3. ***To Complete the Task!***

Hymns: 405 – 427 – 422

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

*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

Though I would imagine there isn’t a lot of joy in running a marathon, there is one point in particular that is the worst for the runner. It is the point in the race when the body sends a message to the brain that it has had enough of this pounding. The brain tells the runner that they have hit the wall, and they really shouldn’t go any farther. Every stride becomes much more than just a simple movement of the legs, it turns into a battle of willpower. It is at this point in the race that the urge to quit is stronger than ever. And that presents a problem, because though the wall might come at the 5 mile mark or the 23 mile mark, it always poses a serious threat to a finished race.

When the apostle Paul spoke the words of the text from Acts, it might have seemed to him as if he had “hit the wall” in regards to his ministry and his life. In the two verses just prior to Acts 20:24 he had this to say: **“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.”** (Acts 20:22-23) Paul was at a point in his life where he had accomplished a great deal. He had been around the Roman world three times on missionary journeys. He had spread the Gospel in countless new places. Through his work, the Holy Spirit had advanced the Kingdom of God upon this earth, establishing churches throughout the world. Through all of that work, Paul had faced the

continued opposition of men, and though it may have slowed him down at times, it never stopped his work completely. But now, it must have surely seemed to Paul as if it was coming to a point where it would stop his work like a wall. The Holy Spirit told Paul that wherever he went from this point in his life, the persecutions for Christ were going to increase, even to the point of prolonged time in prison. This wall was a serious threat to Paul as he sought to finish the race.

As we think about hitting the wall, I believe every Christian person can relate to what the marathon runner and the apostle Paul faced in their races. There are times when the Christian hits the wall as well. I’m sure that you can think about times in your life, perhaps it is even times right now, where you have just plain had enough. Perhaps it is a relationship in which you have come to the point where quitting seems like the best option. Or maybe it is in your job that you have hit the wall. Health problems might lead you to the point where you say, “Enough!” For young people, you might hit the wall in your relationship with your parents. Or maybe, there has come a point where you have had enough of standing up to the temptations that fill your young lives. In each of our lives, there are certainly specific areas that test our endurance.

And for all of us, the wall will come in our spiritual race. It is a part of every Christian’s race where they get to a point where church and Bible study and living as a Christian gets tedious and difficult and even unenjoyable. Satan won’t let any of us run the entire race without trying to get us to think that we have had enough. It might come somewhere towards the start, or in the middle, or even at the end. It might just be a quick hurdle or it could be a lifelong battle, but each of us will at some time be faced with that overwhelming temptation to quit and not finish the race.

And it is vitally important that as you run the race, you realize that reality. Each of you Christian runners needs to know that the wall will come. And when it does come, there are two options. For the runner, the first option is the easy and appealing option. When the brain tells you that your body has had enough, the easy and, perhaps the logical response is to listen. After all, it isn’t as if the runner who hits the wall at mile 21 has accomplished nothing. That runner has given it all he has, he has pushed his body, he has covered much ground. It would be easy for that runner to say, “I’ve done enough for today. I’m happy with what I have accomplished. I can be proud that I made it this far. I don’t need to push on any longer.”

Think of how easy it would have been for Paul to take on that same line of thinking. Last week in our

Old Testament lesson, we heard how the prophet Elijah sat under a tree and asked God to end his life because he had had enough. Could you blame Paul if he had followed Elijah's lead when the Holy Spirit delivered this forecast of his future struggles? If I was Paul I might've said this: "You know, I've run quite the race when it comes to my ministry. God told me to be a light to the Gentiles and I have done that already all over the world. When people hear about Ephesus and Colossus and Thessalonica and Philippi and Galatia in the future, they will inevitably think about my ministry. I believe I can call it quits and be happy. I don't need to push on."

It would be easy for us to react that way when the wall comes in our own lives. If it is hitting the wall in regards to fighting temptation, we might say that we have battled our hardest, but we are only human. If it is in regards to a relationship, we might say that we've done all we can to make it work, but sometimes love simply doesn't last. If it comes to Christ, we might say that we have invested our time and we have lived our faith, but there just isn't enough benefit given in this life to make it worth it. In whatever it is in life, sometimes it just isn't worth it. Let the wall win!

Of course, that isn't without negative results. If the runner gives up, he does not experience the joy of crossing the finish line. If the Apostle Paul would have given up on his ministry, he would have missed seeing how the Lord would continue to spread the Gospel even as he was imprisoned in Rome. If you give up in your fights against temptation, in your relationships, in your daily battles, what will be the result? It will not lead to happiness, it will not make things easier in this life. If you decide to quit when your faith is up against the wall, what will be the result? It will not lead to happiness, it will not make things easier for eternity.

Instead, when the pressure is on, when you feel like you have hit the wall and you just can't continue, at that time, persevere. Burst through the wall and overcome the struggle. Fight all the way. Finish the race. Complete the task! And know that you aren't doing any of that on your own.

In the 1992 Olympics, Dorando Pietri of Italy was the first marathon runner to enter the Olympic stadium for the final mile. He had run the race of his life and was ahead of many other world class runners. Yet, with only a lap to go, Pietri hit the wall. His body said, "Enough!" and collapsed to the ground. Twice he fell to the ground and got back up, but just 30 yards from the finish, he could not rise again. But his race was not over. An official, witnessing his struggle, went over to the exhausted runner and helped him back to his feet. Doing most of the work, this official assisted Pietri until he crossed the finish

line. Of course, Pietri didn't win a medal, but do you think he cared? Do you think the crowd cared? He finished the race.

Perhaps you know how Pietri felt. Maybe you have fallen down in life. Perhaps you are exhausted from fighting temptation or living for Christ or sharing what you believe. As you struggle to push through, you aren't alone. Whenever you struggle, there is someone who comes to raise you up and help you finish the race. Listen to what he says in Isaiah, **"Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."** (Isaiah 40:31)

And with that encouragement and help, you can also strive to complete the task which the Lord has given to each and every Christian. As the Apostle talked about his desire to finish the race, he also spoke about completing the task that was given to him. That task was to be God's **"chosen instrument to carry God's name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel."** (Acts 9:15) And to runners just like Paul, the Lord has given a task as well. He says to each one of us, **"You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth."** (Acts 1:8)

And as we take on that task of preaching the Gospel to those who don't have it, there is the potential for frustration to come. When you bring the message of Christ to people, you will be met with rejection and you will be met with indifference. The reactions that messengers of the Gospel receive out in the world will wear them down and tire them out. However, it is again, in those moments when you feel like giving up that God again brings words of encouragement. Paul says to us, **"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people."** (Galatians 6:9-10a)

What a privilege it is for Christians to know exactly why they run the race of life and to know exactly what it is that waits at the finish line. Certainly, that does not mean that the race will be easy. In fact, we know that the Christian race is more difficult. As you face challenges, as you face struggles, as you are met by "the wall," rely all the more on the one who is with you every step of the way. God will get you to the finish. And with God's help, you will not just finish. You will finish strong. You will complete the task. Amen.