

When I was a high school kid, one of the sports I competed in was Track and Field. We had a great track team and usually won our track meets by a large margin. One of the great assets we had was in the 100 yard dash, we had the kid that was the fastest kid in the whole league. His name was Andy. As a result of Andy's speed, we always won the 100 yard dash.

This was good news for the school, but, not such good news for me. You see, Andy was the fastest kid in the league, but that also made him the fastest kid in the school, and guess who was the second fastest kid in the school - that would be me.

I was a guaranteed second or third place every time I ran the 100. It was a drag.

So, the coaches decided that since they had a guaranteed win in the 100 with Andy, they would pull me to do the low hurdles. Now, if there is a race that will injure a runner every single time they run, that would be low hurdles. The low hurdles, at least in my mind, was a 330 yard extended gauntlet of pain. I was not thrilled, to say the least.

So, I decided in my 16 year old adolescent mind, that if I "lost" my race in the low hurdles, then my coaches would put me back in the 100 yard dash. THAT plan didn't go so well. After I lost my first hurdle race, the coaches went nuts, because, well, it was obvious that I purposely lost.

This went on for a few of track meets, with me trying to look like I was winning, as I was really trying to lose, but I would end up winning most of the time anyway. I tried every way I could think of to lose without looking like I was trying to lose. I tried stepping on every hurdle, I tried getting hung up on each hurdle, I tried a late start, nothing worked.

So the coaches sat me down for a little "talk" about my performance in the hurdles. It turns out they were very aware of my attempts at failure. During our "talk" I agreed to start trying to win my hurdle races and the coaches agreed to put me back in the 100 yard dash. Then, one of the coaches bragged that If I ever won the 100 yard dash, then I wouldn't have to run the hurdles any more. Everyone knew, I didn't stand a chance in winning against Andy.

At our next track meet, I was delighted to be back in the 100 yard dash, since I thought it was the most exciting of all the races I could run. Well, the time arrived for the 100 yard dash. I got into my lane and settled into the blocks. The gun sounded and we were off. I

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had a good start and I was running neck and neck with a guy from the opposing team for awhile with Andy out front. Soon, I outpaced the other runner and it was just like old times with me in second place and Andy in first place.

Then, just before we crossed the finish line, something happened in a split second, but though it happened in a split second, it was like slow motion as I experienced it. Andy glanced my way, gave me a wink and...just stopped running. Andy crossed the finish line in second place. Me, I crossed the finish line in first place.

To this day, I have not had to deal with the menace of the low hurdles.

Let me note this about running a race.

After a race is run, one can analyze the race that was run and think about what had happened during the race and what could have happened different during the race; One can wish this happened during the race, and one can wish that happened during the race - but the fact is, after the race is run, the race is over and no amount of analysis is going to change the outcome of the race.

The time to think about the finish line of a race is not when the race is over, but before the race is finished.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are all in a race, we are all running the race of our life. We all will finish the race we are in. There will be a time when our race will be over. The time to consider the finish line of our race is now, not when our race is over.

I am not speaking of living a life without regret, instead, I'm speaking of living a life for what will be. See, the fact is, we all have a past, some of which we would rather not talk about, and some of which we wish had never happened....we have a past as we live in a sinful world, and we are sinners.

We are not called to be perfect people, we are called to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

When a runner runs a race, the runner always looks forward, the runner does not look backward, the runner gazes toward the finish line. In the same way, we, as a people of God look forward, we strain to see the finish line. We repent of our past, give our past to the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness, and we move forward.

Many of you know that I have fairly poor eyesight. However, my eyesight today is far better than it was when I was a child. The Lord has given me much better eyesight today than I have ever had in my life. When I was a kid, however, my eyesight was terrible.

So as I was describing earlier, I ran the 100 yard dash in track. Now, I could not see the finish line when I was running the 100. When I ran the race, what I would do is start, and run as fast as I possibly could; I ran as hard as I could until I saw the finish line. My eyesight was so poor, that by the time I saw the finish line, the race was over. So I would just run all out until I saw the finish line.

Then, in my senior year, I got contact lenses, and my problems began.

I could now see the finish line from the starting blocks with my contact lenses in. See, before I got contact lenses I was essentially running in the dark because my eyesight was so poor. I had to relearn how to run. Whereas before I ran like a wild man in the dark, I had to learn to look forward, and concentrate on the finish line. I needed to keep my eye on that finish line to run a productive race.

In our spiritual life, we are to neither run wild without direction, like a man running with poor eyesight, nor are we to look back at a past we cannot change, instead we are to live our life forward.

In our passage today, Paul in speaking of finishing the race. Paul gives us insight on our race, Paul give us insight into considering the finish of our own race.

Paul has been at Ephesus for many months and now he was directed by the Holy Spirit to move on. So Paul gives a farewell speech to the church. Paul is using a rhetorical literary form called testaments common in the ancient world.

Paul talks about his present venture, his trip to Jerusalem, and note his misgivings about the outcome. Paul does not know exactly what will happen, but he does know it will be difficult. Is the Lord with him? Yes, the Lord is with him, but still, suffering will fall upon Paul, difficult times will fall upon Paul, completely unfair circumstances will happen to Paul.

So, you and I, we are in this race, and before we finish the race will we see suffering? Will we experience difficult times, perhaps very difficult times? Will people treat us unfairly? Will problems come our way that we in no way deserve?

Yes, yes, yes....and yes.

Exactly who is it in Scripture that does not suffer and experience difficult times? If the most prominent people in biblical times were not spared suffering, why do you think you will escape suffering?

I know that you have had things happen in your life that are completely unfair, but we are never promised in Scripture that life would be fair. You know, in the Bible, we see God operating in a way that is unfair over and over again, as God gives blessings to those who do not in any way deserve what they receive.

I realize saying such things is not, popular, and it is not what people want to hear. Yet, the race we are in is difficult, the race we are in, is not without trouble. We as a people of God need to know that difficult times will come our way, and when they do, we should not be surprised.

Look, would you rather believe the lie that tells us as Christians we will avoid pain and suffering, and then get sideswiped by suffering out of the blue? Or would you rather hear the truth: As a Christian, difficult circumstances, suffering, painful times will happen in your life, and then, not be surprised when difficult times arrive at your doorstep?

I'll have folks come a talk to me describing some shockingly difficult circumstances that they are in, and I am taken back by the tragedy in their life. Then, many times they will ask, Why me? Why is this difficult thing happening to me?

That is never the right question. "Why is this difficult thing happening to me?" is never the correct question. The correct question is, "Why have difficult things like this not happened to me more? Why have I been spared of so much suffering, until now?"

Don't be surprised by difficult times.

Now Paul, here in our passage, even tells us that life or death is not the issue that he is struggling with, for surely at some point he will die. At some point, it will be all over for

Paul. So death, that will happen. Death will happen. Acts 20:25, "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again."

Only two people in the bible did not die Enoch (Gen 5:24, Heb 11:5) and Elijah (2Kings 2:11). Everyone else, good or bad, righteous or unrighteous.....

The issue for Paul is not. One of life or death, but that will his life honor and serve Jesus Christ. Will Christ will be magnified by Paul's life.

Have you noticed Paul, by example, showing us how we should live our life, how we should run the race before us? Paul tells us that it is not about life or death, it is about serving Jesus Christ.

Take note that Paul does not say, I am living my life so that when I die I will have a clear conscience. Paul, does not even consider a clear conscience, for a clear conscience does not fit into Paul's example for living for the Lord.

The truth is, people who strive for a clear conscience in life, do not understand the seriousness of their sin.

Most you here in this room, in fact, probably all of you in this room are better drivers than I am. Now I'm not saying that I am not a skilled driver, no, I have driving skills....and that's part of the problem. I commuted for many years in the SF Bay Area where speed and agility at close quarters win the day. I also drove in New Jersey for years where taking advantage of the other drivers at ever opportunity, wins the day.

When I drive here in Anchorage, though I am learning to be a nicer driver, when I drive, I will drive around you when you are going too slow, drive closer to you than you find comfortable, I will pull in front of you if you give me the opportunity, and I will steal your turn at a four way stop if given the opportunity.

Many, if not most of you here, are appalled at how I just described my driving habits - but I tell you, when I pull into that parking space - my conscience is clear, but does that mean I have not sinned?

For many of you, if you had my driving habits, you would be racked with guilt, your conscience would bother you....living your life with the goal of a clear conscience is

neither realistic, nor is it biblical, nor does it in all honesty reflect a life well lived - it may reflect a life of ignoring what is really happening right in front of you.

We don't live for a clear conscience, we live for the Lord Jesus, as Paul, our example is living for the Lord Jesus. What that means in practical terms is that if I live my life for the Lord Jesus, then, I am not trying to impress humans with my life, nor am I living my life to impress myself.

At the end of time when we stand before the Father, it is then that we will fully realize the one who we are trying to impress with our lives.....

Chesterton said "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and not tried."

Paul has talked about his certain death, he certainly has not been very uplifting here has he? Then he gets worse.

Paul looks toward the future, and the prospects of the church he has spent so much time in are not promising. In verses 29-30 Paul describes dissension to the truth of the Gospel rising up, not only from the outside, but from within the church.

Paul leaves knowing suffering is what stands before him, and dissension lays behind him. Wow, this is heavy stuff.

This development did take place in the church as evident from 1 and 2 Timothy. In 2 Tim 1:15 there is mentioned a general revolt against Paul and his teaching. What Paul predicted came true. The effort Paul placed into these people soon fell apart.

Later in church history, Ignatius wrote a letter to the same church a decade or two later, and this letter shows that the church did recover and became strong once again.

The church had difficult times, as Paul had difficult times. This wasn't a surprise was it? Paul told them difficult times would enter into their lives as a church. For us as well, we should not be surprised by difficult times entering into our lives.

Now let me end with this: Difficult, seriously difficult times came into Paul's life, yet God saw Paul through. God never abandons Paul.

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We will see in the following chapters how God has his hand on Paul, giving him the perfect words to say in the most difficult of times. Jesus Christ places Paul in the right place at the right time, he sees kings, powerful people, Paul goes places and does things he could have never done as an ordinary rabbi - but as a servant of Jesus Christ Paul is able to bring the Gospel to the furthest possible place from where he started -

Paul brings the Gospel not only to Rome, but Paul leaps the boundaries of time and through the holy Scriptures Paul brings the Gospel to Anchorage Alaska, and to your heart and your life today. Paul ran the race, Paul looked forward, Paul crossed the finish line.

We are running this race to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us take Paul's advice and focus the finish line, our goal of living our life for Jesus Christ.