

# The Race Of Your Life

Texts: Jeremiah 14: 7-9, 19-22; 2 Timothy 4: 6-21; Luke 18:9-14

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2 Timothy 4: 7-8 "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 4:8 From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

In these verses, Paul's talking sports, and since he's doing it, I set myself the challenge to write a sermon about these verses that was all about sports, using as many sports clichés as I can. So get ready, the buzzer is about to sound and the first period is about to start.

What can you say about fighting the good fight, finishing the race, winning the crown? Well you can say, Wow, Paul, nothing but net there! You really hit a home run with those verses! You won the gold medal!

There's just something about sports metaphors that we all understand. All those metaphors I just used celebrate success in sports: The basketball swish of nothing but net; the crack of the bat and the roar of the crowd of a baseball home run; the national anthems playing and flag going up of the gold medal ceremony at the Olympics. All are images of success and victory.

And all the metaphors Paul used were also about sports and victory. He's fighting the fight against evil, he's running a race against time to get the good news about Jesus and the love of God out to the world, and he's looking forward to receiving a crown from God as a sign of the victory his life will be after living it with Jesus.

I'll say more about that in a moment, but it's time for the first intermission. Back in the locker room, the coach says, "What's going on here? I hope you didn't leave it all on the practice court. Save some for the game."

That's kind of what Kate said to me yesterday. She had just told me that the New London Wildcats, her high school team, had made it to the State Championships in Cross Country, both the boys and girls teams, and I went off on how I will never understand how Americans can be so sports mad, that decades after graduating she still cares about her high school team, I'm Canadian and I just don't get that, but that it was kind of funny, because the sermon was all about Paul talking sports. She

was like, “Don’t tell me! Tell them!” I guess she didn’t want to hear the sermon twice. Smart woman!

When Kate told me not to leave it all in the practice gym, she was acting a bit like a coach, someone who’s not in the game but who cares about the outcome, someone who has insights into what’s going on that the players who are right in the middle of the action all the time might not have. It’s good to have a coach. What a coach does is kind of what a pastor is trying to do, if you think about it.

You’re the ones playing in this great game of Christian life, and the pastor is like the coach, trying to help you to use your talent to the best of your ability to have a great outcome – the pastor wants you to play so that that great cloud of witnesses that Hebrews talks about, the one that surrounds us all, will break into cheers for you.

That crowd of witnesses are the people of faith who have gone before us and are now watching from the stands, the people we celebrate on All Saints’ Day, who know what it’s like to be where we are, down here on the field, and who cheer us on no matter what, because, well, that’s what fans do for their team.

Okay, that little side speech of an intermission is over, please take your seats again for the second period. The puck’s about to drop.

We think of a madness for sports to be something that is relatively modern but let me tell you, sports metaphors have been going on for a long time!

We don’t think of them as being in the Bible, but Paul’s verses are full of them, as we already saw. Let’s take a closer look: he takes one from wrestling (or it might be boxing): I have fought the good fight.

He takes another from running: I have finished the race.

And he takes another from the Olympic games, the crown of righteousness.

Well, actually it’s more likely that Paul’s thinking of one of the other great games they celebrated in ancient Greece, the Isthmian Games that were held every two years in Paul and Timothy’s old stomping ground, Corinth and which Paul and Timothy may well have attended together.

This crown of righteousness Paul is talking about is the crown the winners of the ancient Games got crowned with a wreath to celebrate their victories, whether it was an olive wreath at the Olympic games, or a pine wreath in Corinth.

When Paul is writing, it's late in the game. Paul is coming to the final lap of his race in the Christian faith, the final buzzer is about to sound, he's in referee's time and the final whistle is about to blow. He is the wily old veteran just about to retire, and he's talking to the young rookie coming off the bench whose career is just starting.

That young rookie is Paul's much younger colleague, Timothy, which is why the letter is called 2 Timothy. It's Paul's second letter to his young friend. Timothy, like most young men, was probably into sports.

Paul is trying to inspire Timothy for what he knows is likely to be a long and arduous life ahead. He's using the sports metaphors because they are memorable and because they are something familiar to Timothy.

Paul expected Jesus to come back within his lifetime, but it hasn't happened, and so now he's thinking of the future, of next season, as it were, and what he has to do to make sure that Timothy keeps playing well even after Paul, one of the star players, is no longer there.

The Roman Empire is a big opponent, and the Christians are really having a tough time of it.

We might compare what Paul's trying to do to what Notre Dame coach Knute Rockne tried to do with his halftime speech when Notre Dame was losing to Army in 1928 and he needed to inspire them to a great second half.

Rockne used a story about Notre Dame's greatest player, George Gipp, who was cut down by pneumonia at the tender age of 25 just one month after his final football game for Notre Dame. Here's what Rockne said in the locker room at halftime (from the Notre Dame Archives

<http://archives.nd.edu/research/texts/rocknespeech.html>):

ROCKNE: Well, boys ... I haven't a thing to say. Played a great game...all of you. Great game.

(He tries to smile.) I guess we just can't expect to win 'em all. (Rockne pauses and says quietly). I'm going to tell you something I've kept to myself for years -- None of you ever knew George Gipp. It was long before your time. But you know what a tradition he is at Notre Dame...

(There is gentle, faraway look in his eyes as he recalls the boy's words). And the last thing he said to me -- "Rock," he said - "sometime, when the team is up against it -- and the breaks are beating the boys -- tell them to go out there with all they got and win just one for the Gipper ...

(Knut's eyes become misty and his voice is unsteady as he finishes). I don't know where I'll be then, Rock", he said - "but I'll know about it - and I'll be happy."

With that a player cries, "Let's get 'em!" and they all rush out to the field. Notre Dame came back to win the game, and established "Win one for the Gipper" as a permanent saying in American life.

Paul knows that he won't be around much longer, and he wants to inspire Timothy to keep going when the breaks are beating the boys -- and Paul's life of suffering shows that that will happen a lot -- and to win the world for justice, and win people over with the love of Christ.

He knows it won't be easy -- at halftime they were losing badly to the Romans, outnumbered millions of pagans to a few thousand Christians, but Paul thinks it is doable, that the Roman Empire can be won for Christ, that it ain't over until it's over, that the fat lady hasn't sung yet!

Besides, Paul knows that the Christians have a ringer waiting on the sidelines, and that when Jesus comes back into the game, it's going to be game over.

The team, that is, the church, just has to keep the game going until then, keep moving the ball downfield, down after painful down, perhaps losing ground in some generations, making a great play in the next to make up for it.

Now, one thing you might notice is that all of Paul's metaphors are about the end. He's fought the good fight; he's finished the race; he has won the crown. Through everything that came, good and bad, he has kept the faith.

Paul is emphasizing what comes at the end, because that's the reason we do everything leading up to it.

Every great athlete knows that victory is not won on the field on the day of the game, but in the practice gym every morning at 6 am. All the hard work is done for a reason, so that victory is possible in the end.

And it's important to remember that reason while you're doing all the hard work or you might stop doing it. If you don't keep your eyes on the prize, as the great civil rights slogan had it, you might not be willing to make the sacrifices that are necessary to win.

It's important to remember in the midst of the pummeling fight of Christian life, in the midst of the exhausting marathon of faith, when your breath is lost and you feel like you can't go on any farther, that what waits for you at the other end is the crown that Christ Jesus has prepared for you.

In a way, though, all of this is almost too individual a look at what Paul means. Earlier in the letter, in chapter 1, Paul had written, "Timothy, I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and then in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives also in you."

This is not an image of an individual race, but rather the image of a relay race, with the baton passed from one runner to the next, where only one runner will be the one to cross the finish line, but all the runners will win the prize together.

Each runner must run a good race in his or her leg in order for the team to succeed. If anyone drops the baton, the team is in big trouble.

This image of a relay race would have been familiar to Timothy. In the ancient world, the relay race was an Olympic sport and the racers carried torches that they passed from one to another. No team could win if they didn't pass the torch successfully. Here Paul is passing the torch to Timothy. And he did it successfully.

What's always strikes me as strange about reading the Bible is that Timothy is forever a young man. He never grows old, at least not in the Scripture! He's always Paul's younger colleague! But in real life, of course, Timothy grew old and died. But he in his turn passed on the torch to the next generation, and so it has been, generation after generation, until it was passed to us.

In much of the world, the Christian faith is growing, in Asia, in sub Saharan Africa, in South America. But where we are, we've had a bit of a bad quarter. Our job is to come out of the locker room full of Spirit and to make a great comeback.

We aren't trying to win one for the Gipper. We're trying to win one for God. And we have to keep going. That's what Paul kept telling Timothy. Keep going, fight to win, run to get the crown, keep your eyes on the prize that Jesus has in store for you.

The lesson Paul was trying to teach Timothy is the same lesson that he would want us to learn. Keep going no matter what the odds. Pass on the torch from one generation to the next. Keep on fighting to fight the good fight for justice and what is right; keep on running, keep on trying to win the crown that the Lord has stored up for us.

Remember why we are doing all this: because Jesus Christ has chosen us for his team, and we have to come through for him. We still have a world to win for justice, grace and love. We still have a torch to pass to a new generation. And we still have a crown to win when our lives are in the record books.

And I know we will. Now let's go get'em!

Amen