

## Week 9 Day 7 | *Running the Race: The Finish*

An avid racer will tell you that there's a big difference between finishing and finishing strong. Somebody who merely finishes might only feel relief, exhaustion, or even disappointment. Strong finishers, however, while still tired, feel pride, accomplishment, and satisfaction knowing that they executed to the best of their ability. Whatever positive feelings "mere finishers" have are born out of the removal of something negative. Strong finishers' feelings stem from the achievement of something positive. Though the race was hard, they did all they could, the best they could, for as long as they could and powered through the finish line.

As we've talked about this week, our fitness is its own kind of race. Body stewardship is a funny thing. Whereas other kinds of stewardship might get easier as we get older, fitness... not so much. For instance, as we enter retirement, we're not likely to start blowing all of our money on pointless pursuits. We know our bank accounts need to outlast us. We will be wise with our money. As we get older, we also realize more and more the value of our relationships, especially with our families. So, we look for ways to spend more time with them. We will be intentional with the time we have remaining.

Yet with fitness, our bodies are working against us. Not only does exercise get harder, the basic physical routine of life gets harder. Our sleep might increase, but so does our waistline. It's a deadly combination of a less active lifestyle and a greater temptation to use food as entertainment. You may not be able to run as far or as fast; but, hey, you can always eat out, right? Then the cycle of a more sedentary life and a focus on food perpetuates itself, each feeding on the other. Although other areas of stewardship might improve, finishing strong with our fitness gets more and more challenging. Challenging, but not impossible.

For the model on finishing strong, we once again turn to the Apostle Paul. Paul set a wonderful example for us on how to run a race: he was intentional with every factor. He had a clear *purpose* for the race: complete the task Jesus gave him of sharing the good news (Acts 20:24). His *plan* was to do all he could to build an effective and upright church body, ensuring that his work was not in vain (Philippians 2:16). His *pace* was perseverance, as he kept the faith and fought the good fight (2 Timothy 4:7). Neither *people* nor *walls* could stop him because he would just turn them into *breaks* that refueled him (Acts 16:25–40).

For Paul, finishing strong included being martyred for his faith. My guess is in those final moments he had only one thing on his mind. He wanted to receive the heavenly prize for which he had been called (Philippians 3:14).

For Paul, the race was hard. Yet he did all he could, the best he could, for as long as he could.

I believe that fitness, for Christians, is a reflection of or a response to their faith. Similar to our faith, strong fitness requires doing the hard things in the hard times. Strong fitness takes effort. It doesn't happen overnight. It's a process. Not unlike faith, one needs to "work out their fitness with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). Just like with our salvation, as Paul goes on to say, He will work in us:

*"... for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."—Philippians 2:13 (NIV)*

Paul understood God was at work in him to accomplish God's will. Paul must have desperately held on to this promise up through the time of his death. You see, Paul was never the one doing the work. He was not "willing" his way to the finish line. He was never the one "acting." Paul was never the one fulfilling the purpose. God was at work. It was God working through Paul to accomplish His purpose for Paul and for God's greater good. Paul finished the race strong because God carried him through.

God will carry you, too, if you let Him. We are all in the fitness race. We will all finish the fitness race. We will not all finish strong however. The degree to which we rely on God "to will and act in order to fulfill His purpose" determines how strong we finish. Our reliance on Him also dictates how much we enjoy the run.

In the 1981 Academy Award-winning movie *Chariots of Fire*, there's a great scene with one of the protagonists, Eric Liddell. Eric, a devout Christian and Olympic hopeful, is confronted by his sister for missing a prayer meeting. Though she questions his faith, Eric tells her that he intends to someday return to the mission field in China. Now though, he feels he needs to focus on running, "I believe that God made me for China. But He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure."

God made each one of us for a purpose . . . for His purposes. That purpose includes involving Him to empower us. If we go the road alone, trying to operate out of our strength, we will merely finish.

When we rely on Him in us, however, we too will feel His pleasure. It strengthens us to do all we can . . . the best we can . . . for as long as we can. It strengthens us to finish strong.

### Prayer

*Father, thank You for getting me this far. Will You please forgive me when I complain about the journey? Please help me to always rely on You in me, so that I might feel your pleasure. Amen.*

### Meditation

You finish strong in me.

### Daily Spiritual Exercise

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 as part of your Bible reading today. Then, as you're praying out loud, ask God for His strength to work in you, not just for your fitness but in your faith. God works in us to finish what He starts.

Tell Him you don't want to merely finish. Ask Him to empower you that you might run in such a way to get the prize and fulfill His good purpose.