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# FINISHING THE RACE

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• A CHRISTIAN ENDING TO OUR LIFE •

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BY PETER E. GILLQUIST

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**A**nyone who has spent time reading the classic writings of the early Church or studying Church history knows there are countless and curious differences between the ancient and the modern views of the Christian life. Today we focus on the new birth; the ancients called for being faithful to the end. We moderns talk of wholeness and purposeful living now; they spoke of the glories of the Kingdom to come.

This is not to say the early saints ignored initial conversion; nor does it mean we today have forgotten about the eternal Kingdom. But our emphasis has shifted from the completing of the Christian life to the beginning of it. Frances Eastwood, in the preface to her classic nineteenth-century novel, *Marcella of Rome*, says it well:

As justification by faith may be said to be the key which opened to the Middle Ages the door of the Reformation, so the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, with its revelation of a glorious heaven awaiting those faithful to the end, was the grand point in Christianity which appealed most strongly to the feelings of the pagan, and answered most perfectly the cravings of his awakened spirit.

Or, consider our role models. The heroes in modern evangelism are the living, contemporary Christians: the famous authors, evangelists, Bible teachers, born-again athletes or politicians, who are in the public limelight with their stirring testimonies of initial conversion. But in days gone by, it was those who had finished the course, those who—living still, to be sure—had gone home to glory, who were counted as heroes of the Faith.

A classic New Testament passage describing how the early Church viewed its heroes is Hebrews 12:1–3. Note, as you read, the sense of presence of both these mortals and their immortal Savior:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

Notice, too, there were no contemporary believers singled out for the accolades of Hebrews chapter 11. Everyone in this august assembly had completed the earthly pilgrimage in faithful holiness, and had been enrolled in heaven. In the ancient Church, no living persons were ever canonized as saints. This is not to say that living Christians are not saints: the Scriptures call them such. But it is necessary to point out that the early Christians designated their godly heroes only from the

ranks of those who had *finished* the journey successfully. Simply starting well with the Lord was not enough.

We begin to get a message here, do we not? Remaining faithful to Christ is essential to true holiness, and is of eternal importance in his sight. It is not adequate merely to have a spectacular conversion or a glowing story of deliverance. There is no such thing as an “overcomer, retired.” God calls us to be on our feet and in the fight at the final bell.

Rather than centering our attention on contemporary Christian figures and hoping for the best in terms of future results, would it not be better to follow the example set down by the author of Hebrews? Would we not profit more by holding the saints and martyrs of the Faith from days gone by in proper high esteem, reading of their faith and telling their stories to our children—realizing that all the votes are not yet in for those of us who are still in our pilgrimage to the City of God?

## **FINISHING THE RACE**

In my sixteenth year I learned a lesson that has somehow stayed with me until today.

I had gone out for the high-school



cross-country team—a sport that to this day I consider the absolutely worst way in all the world to earn an athletic letter! It was the first day of practice, and the coach had taken us on the bus to a course that ran up and down several hills over a four-mile span. For those of us who were not in good shape, or who had never run distance races before, the prospects of that late afternoon were particularly dismal.

Before he fired the starting gun, that coach said something to us that I have never forgotten. “What I am asking you to do today is to finish the race. If you don’t plan to finish, then I do not want you to start. Simply stay where you are when the gun is fired. But if you start, then you *will* finish.”

He told us that likely our legs could tighten, our stomachs cramp. We could slow down or even stop for a bit. But we could not quit once we had begun. “We’ll wait here all night if need be,” he told us. “If you agree to start, then I want you to cross this finish line—no matter what.”

The first mile was almost euphoric. The cool, fresh autumn air was a natural boost to my dogged determination to run a good race. But after a mile and a half or so, the joy began

to fade. By two miles, whatever pleasure there had been in all of this was totally gone. From here on out, it was sheer drudgery. Some of my teammates were depositing the egg-salad sandwiches they had eaten for lunch at the school cafeteria in the tall grass and bushes at the edge of the course. They would stop for a bit, find some relief, and then fall back into the panting procession.

My legs started to cramp. I did not know thigh muscles could ever be so tired. And I felt that my breath would leave me forever; my lungs and chest cavity were in almost unbearable pain as I approached the enormous upward hill near the two-and-one-half-mile mark.

There was one thing and one thing only that kept me going. *Before I started, I had agreed to finish the race.* My body said, *Quit!* My mind silently screamed, *Insanity!* But the choice had been made way back there, when the gun went off. That issue was not open for renegotiation. There were no options, no shortcuts. In inexpressible agony, I kept on running.

I can barely remember crossing the finish line. They said I came in fifth or sixth. But even that was not of first importance. Every ounce

of energy I possessed had gone into simply reaching the goal. I really could not believe I had made it.

We must have waited around twenty or thirty minutes for the rest of the team to finish. It was dark and bitterly cold by the time the last man crossed the line. We caught our breath, grumbled a bit to each other, and boarded the bus for home.

Over the years, I have thought back to that experience as being an incredible picture of what it is to live the Christian life. In fact, the Scriptures repeatedly use the metaphor of our life with Christ being a race. And it's not a sprint, mind you, it's a marathon!

In any race there are three basic and essential components: *the start*, *the race itself*, and *the finish*. And you need all three to win. You can have the fastest exit from the starting blocks known to man, but if you are slow on the turn, or sloppy in the stretch, your record start will not be sufficient for victory. Or, you can be unbeatable on the open track, but if you drop out fifty yards short of the goal, the rest of the effort is for naught. In any race, it's the first runner *across the line* who wins.

Be it in athletics or be it in the Christian

journey, we must finish the race in order to qualify for the victory circle.

## **STARTING BLOCKS**

For the Christian, the start of our faith is the *New Birth*. We come to believe in Christ, and in Holy Baptism we are placed into union with Him. For Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

We have to remember that saving faith is the all-important beginning of our life in Christ, but that we do not *stop* with faith. Paul writes, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1, 2). We “have access” by faith, we are introduced to Christ by faith, but there is more to come.

I am troubled by the unbalanced emphasis today on getting people to make a one-time decision for Christ. Don’t get me wrong: I call people to make decisions for Christ almost every time I speak. But the implication so

often is, simply saying “yes” once will, in and of itself, see you through.

Let us be clear on this. You cannot even qualify for the Christian race unless you have been born anew. But the goal is not reached by being introduced to Christ. No, finishing the race requires perseverance right down to the wire! “For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (Hebrews 3:14).

To repeat, the major thrust in our day has been on getting people to make an initial turn to Christ. It is hard to object to any attempt to ask people to put their trust in Him. But I firmly believe God is sick and tired of schemes which call for first-time decisions but do not make sure those who respond go on with the Lord in His Church. Jesus told us to make disciples, not to get decisions. If disciples are not the goal, we are only cluttering up the track!

There is nothing more heart-warming than a six-month-old baby. At this stage the infant develops strong eye contact, the cooing stage is underway, and generally the little person has learned to sleep all night. But if this is all the maturity the child has shown at fifteen years of age, it is no longer cute. It is tragic. Let’s

have all the legitimate new births we can get. But let us be sure they are born again into a household—the Church of God—where growth occurs and where the faithful are called upon to complete the race set before them.

A five-run first inning, an eighty-yard opening kickoff return for a score are fine. Bring them on. But let us keep in mind the real issue, the ultimate goal: will we bring the game to victory at the end? An effective beginning is only as good as an effectual ending.

## **THE LONG STRETCH**

We are joined to Christ in Holy Baptism, we are set apart from the world for God’s use as participants in the race. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that we run the course set before us. And how crucial it is for us, as we are running, to keep our eyes fastened on “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). We therefore resist the temptation of thinking that just because we have made a good start, victory is automatic and quitting impossible. The warning Paul issued to the first-century Galatians comes through to us loud and clear: “You ran well.

Who hindered you from obeying the truth?” (Galatians 5:7).

In 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, the Apostle again uses the theme of a race as a picture of the Christian life. And what a challenge he issues to the children of God. He writes:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they [the athletes] do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Note first, that everyone runs to win. All do not finish in first place, but we are all to run with winning in mind. Obviously, Paul is not saying only one, the first-place finisher, will make it on to heaven. But it is an eternal mistake for

any of us to assess our own abilities, and then aim to finish second, or third, or fourth. Do not become complacent or determine, “Well, I have only a few talents”; or, “The Lord made me a ‘thirtyfold’ Christian.” It’s God’s business to determine our capabilities, not ours! Thus, we do not second-guess our spiritual equipping, and run with mediocrity. Instead, we always run to finish first.

Though the ultimate and eternal prize is that for which we strive, we also run incrementally the long course of life. No runner in a long race thinks *only* about the finish line. He looks ahead to a familiar landmark, a tree, the peak of a hill, a bridge, and determines to reach that point. Similarly, the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, tells that he is “reaching forward to those things which are ahead,” pressing “toward the goal for the prize” (3:13, 14). He isn’t trying to make it all the way in one big lunge.

Thus, we also live as Christians “one day at a time.”

Old age has been described as that time of life in which a person begins looking backward, not forward. Be careful here! Though there are memories, a life consecrated to God



is one which continually looks forward—to trials which must be faced, tasks which must be completed, challenges to be met, and worship to be enacted. If we can think of little else, there are always evening or morning prayers, next Sunday's Divine Liturgy, the coming seasons of Advent, Lent, Easter, or Pentecost. We persevere in the tasks at hand until that next landmark is visible ahead. Then we fix our eyes upon the one which follows.

The biblical phrase “walk in the Spirit” is helpful here. A literal rendering is to “lock step with” the Holy Spirit, to “fall into step” with Him. It is as though the Holy Spirit is calling out a heavenly cadence—*left, right, left, right, one, two, one, two*—to the Church. Those who are born of God and have the Holy Spirit are given ears to hear the commands of God and new hearts to obey them and carry them out.

But we are also given eyes to see where our predecessors have gone. Their stories of faith, the Scriptures tell us, have been written for our instruction. As those set apart to God, we keep step, not with the world, but with the Holy Spirit who speaks to the Church. The crown of victory for such persistent obedience is imperishable.

A final observation on Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians has to do with his own personal concern regarding himself. To me, this is one of the most sobering passages in all of Scripture. For in his steadfast aim to run well in the long stretch of his earthly Christian pilgrimage, he does not discount the possibility that "...when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

If the same one who writes, "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38, 39), gives us this warning about disqualification, we need to listen all the more carefully.

Many in contemporary evangelicalism have paid nearly exclusive attention to the believer's security passages, *and they are there*. But this same group often ignores the passages revealing God's explicit warnings against apostasy. *And they are there!* We had better hear both the promise of glory and the warning of judgment. The fact is, if I quit the race in mid-life, I will be disqualified. I

cannot get around that truth in the Scripture.

And rather than sitting around arguing about everything inherent in the meaning of the word *disqualify*, we Christians are instructed to get on with this business of living as holy people, staying on track and finishing the race which is set before us. If Paul didn't become enamored with his past service and faithfulness to God, then by all means neither should we keep re-reading our own spiritual press clippings.

## **CROSSING THE LINE**

If the starting point of belonging to God is the New Birth, if the race itself is to walk in the Spirit, the finish line is the “crown of life” (James 1:12). It's those three absolutely necessary elements again: the start, the race to be run well, and the finish. Like our predecessors in Christ—the saints, the martyrs, the confessors—we recognize all three.

Choosing one or even two of these elements as a point of emphasis will invariably open the door to unholy conduct and imbalanced faith. This race is not positional, not mental, not symbolic. It is as real as life itself! You and I are set apart to God for the purpose of *running*

*to win and crossing the line at the end.*

Is this attainable? Of course it is. Do not forget: as a baptized Christian you have come into living union by faith with the One who is Author and Perfecter (Finisher) of the race. Our Lord Jesus Christ not only conceived of and designed the course we run in His Church, but in His humanity He completed it and gives us His strength to do the same. We take part in His mission.

When He prayed, “I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do” (John 17:4), He stood before His Father as victor in the battle. It is *in His victory* that we enter the competition ourselves. The one from whom we draw our life is already in the winner’s circle!

In the last New Testament letter written by Paul, in 2 Timothy 4:7, 8, the Apostle reveals to Timothy that he has completed his race:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only

but also to all who have loved His appearing.

In an era when holiness has become a forgotten theme, the Christian life is sometimes described as a “party,” a “dance,” or as a prosperity-oriented, problem-free “abundant life.” But Paul, who had been set apart unto God, who knew the raging battle of Kingdom against kingdom, called his pilgrimage with Christ a “good fight.” Doesn’t that say it? It is *good* because of the One who has called us to win; it’s a *fight* because we constantly war and battle against the enemy.

Paul not only engaged in the battle—he not only ran the race—he completed it. The one who possessed a holy, healthy fear that he might not finish, *finished!* It was just a short time after his final correspondence to his beloved understudy Timothy that this great Apostle to the Gentiles was martyred in Rome and received the very crown of righteousness of which he wrote.

## **THE UNSURPASSED GOAL**

Of all things in the Kingdom of God I want to experience, none surpasses the desire of

crossing the finish line, being brought before the throne of God, face-to-face with the Shepherd of my soul, our great heavenly Bishop, and hearing Him say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” Conversely, I can think of no greater ruin than to run the race in vain and be disqualified.

Let me ask you a question: Will you unreservedly commit yourself to finishing the race?

If you are a Christian, I am sure you have heard many and varied challenges to commit your life to Christ. And you have no doubt been asked on several occasions to continue on with Him. I am not, on this occasion, asking either of these. I am calling you to commit yourself, whatever the cost, to finish the race. To not quit. Ever. For the Scriptures are clear that salvation is holistic, and includes being born again, running well, and enduring to the end. As the holy ones of God, we are called upon to participate in each phase.

When I talk about finishing the race, I do not mean deciding to do so on your own energy, for that would not be attainable. Paul corrected those who tried such a thing when he wrote, “Are you so foolish? Having begun

in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3).

Instead, I am asking you to commit yourself to finishing that for which you have been called, to do so in faith, relying upon the strength and power of God. For one reason we were granted that strength and power in the first place was to run and win. Listen to the ancient Prophet Isaiah, in chapter 40:28–31:

Have you not known?

Have you not heard?

The everlasting God, the LORD,  
The Creator of the ends of the earth,  
Neither faints nor is weary.

There is no searching of His under-  
standing.

He gives power to the weak,  
And to those who have no might He  
increases strength.

Even the youths shall faint and be  
weary,

And the young men shall utterly fall,  
But those who wait on the LORD  
Shall renew their strength;

They shall mount up with wings like  
eagles,

They shall run and not be weary,  
They shall walk and not faint.

Do you see who is granted the strength to run and win? *It is those who know they cannot do it on their own!* God promises to “give power to the weak.” Thus, the people of God throughout history have been earmarked as men and women who did not count their lives dear unto themselves. They set their minds and hearts on crossing the finish line, *no matter what.*

It is when we commit ourselves to walk with Christ to the end that extra strength from Him is supplied—“being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).







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