

The Story: Marathon Man
By Jason Huff
Proverbs 4:20-27, John 15:1-14, 2 Timothy 3:10-4:8

Our final Scripture reading today comes from 2 Timothy 3:10-4:8. Listen now to God's Word in Paul's final letter. "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings -- what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage -- with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day -- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

We've reached horse racing season. Having lived in Kentucky for a few years, I am now more aware than ever of the pomp and circumstance that goes into the sport, and I got to thinking about it when the Derby ran a week or so ago. It made me think of the recent film **Secretariat**, about the horse that won the Triple Crown 40 years ago. You're drawn into this story of a woman who knows in her gut that her horse is a winner, and she bets the family farm on it. The thing about Secretariat was this: the horse was fantastic at short distance runs. But when it came to the Belmont Stakes, Secretariat would have to run a longer race than he'd ever run before. How could a strong sprinter have the stamina and endurance to keep going? Well, the rest is history. Secretariat not only won the Belmont Stakes, he won it by over 30 lengths. His feat set a record that has not yet been broken. In the horse racing world, Secretariat won the marathon.

As we near the conclusion of *The Story*, we read the end of Paul's marathon journey and how he finished strong. As we heard last week, Paul and his various companions went throughout the Roman world spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, first to the Jews in their synagogues and then to the Gentiles. It was hard work, and Paul found himself in trouble often. Yet he continued on four separate missionary journeys, facing the burdens and beatings and struggles so that the name of Christ would be proclaimed and new believers would join in His worship and call. We learn of these journeys through this letters and the books of Acts.

The last third of Acts tells us how Paul eventually was able to travel to Rome and preach the gospel even to Caesar. It starts with a fateful trip to Jerusalem. Through many different prophets in the church, Paul was warned that when he traveled there, he would be bound in chains for the Gospel...yet he was still to go. When he arrived and went to the temple, a group of Jews from Asia recognized him seized him and beat him, and the only thing that stopped them from killing him was the intervention of a Roman commander. His men take Paul away to their barracks, and over the course of a few days, Paul attempts to speak with the Jewish leaders, only for them to shout him down and argue amongst themselves.

In the midst of it all, it comes out that Paul was born a Roman citizen. That's a huge deal, for only a small number of people throughout the Roman empire were actually citizens and not just subjects. Roman citizens had rights and protections other people did not have. For example, Paul could not be beaten or treated harshly, and charges were necessary to hold him. For a period of a couple of years, Paul is bounced back and forth between prison and the regional governor Felix as they try to figure out what to do with him, since they have no right to hand him over to the Jewish leaders. Finally, when Felix leaves and his successor Festus arrives, Paul makes a bold request that only a citizen could make – he appeals to Caesar to hear his case.

After witnessing to the new governor and the reigning Herod, he, Luke, and some others are sent on a ship to Rome. It's a very long voyage, and while Paul warns them what they should do to avoid disaster, the sailors pay him no attention. And as Paul said, the whole thing nearly ends in catastrophe when major storms hit and all the cargo and food goes overboard. Yet Paul reassures them that they will be kept safe, and they run aground just off the island of Malta. Through a series of miracles, those on the island come to believe in Jesus.

Finally, they are able to set sail in an another ship that had wintered in Malta, and they eventually reach Rome. Paul presents the faith to the Jews living in Rome with limited success. We're told that he lived in a rented house there for two years, perhaps under some form of house arrest, welcoming all visitors who wanted to hear about Christianity. And we know from the rest of the events of his life that he did appear before Caesar and was exonerated of all charges. This was no small thing. The church started off with a small group of believers waiting for the Holy Spirit, and in less than thirty years, it had been preached all the way to the center of the known world.

From here, though, Paul's journeys become less clear. We know he continued to travel, spreading the word of Christ. But we also know that a new emperor came into power: Nero. Under his reign, Christians faced persecution like never before. Church history tells us that Nero had the apostle Peter crucified upside-down, and Paul died under Nero's reign as well. Shortly before his death, as he sat imprisoned and alone in a cold jail cell, Paul wrote the words of 2 Timothy that we heard this morning. Paul admonished his young friend to carefully follow what he had learned from Paul and from the Scriptures, warning him of what to expect but urging him to keep the faith and to pass it on faithfully. And though he knew the end was near, Paul was not afraid. As he wrote, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

When I read about Paul's journey to Rome and his final days, I started to think about the question of perseverance. Hebrews 10:36 commands us, "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised." But it's one of the most difficult things we can even fathom. We have enough problems barely getting through the end of the school year, let alone thinking about persevering in our faith through the very real trials and troubles we face. How did Paul do it? In the story of Paul's life, did God give us keys to following Jesus faithfully for a lifetime? I believe He did.

The first key I saw in Paul's life to perseverance in faith was this: he knew what he believed and stood for it. He was clear with friends and detractors alike; he would never compromise the gospel of Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul writes, "I have become all things to all men so that by all means I might save some." Paul worked through social and cultural differences so that Jesus was clearly known and understood by Jew and Gentile alike. But his core message was always the same: you must repent of sin and turn to Christ.

When Paul wrote to Timothy as we read this morning, Paul knew there were many coming in the name of Jesus with a totally different gospel. He warned Timothy of those who would rather hear a soothing message than the one that said we were to die to ourselves in order to follow Christ. Yet he pleads with Timothy: study the Scriptures, preach the Word of God, keep the faith. At the end of his life, he was exhausted, imprisoned, and deserted. Yet he would not desert the faith because it *was* him; he had *become* his faith in Jesus.

In Ephesians 4, Paul writes that God wants us to become mature in the faith. Paul says at that point, "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." Paul longed for us to not only know our faith thoroughly but also to live in it and grow in it.

A key issue for us is that those waves of false teaching are still washing up around us. We have the TV, the Internet, the radio, all shouting at us things we are supposed to believe. And unless you have a thorough grounding in Scripture, unless you have been taught the faith and know it, it's easy to lose sight of it when the latest trend or fad arises. Not all of us are cultural warriors; not all of us are called to defend the faith on a regular basis. But at the very least, we should know what we believe and why we believe it.

There are many reasons we come together as a church – to worship, to fellowship, to serve – but historically, the body of believers came together to learn the faith that Jesus Christ taught. In the early church, it took three years of teaching and daily study before a person was baptized and became an official member. Gentiles memorized large sections of the Old Testament so they knew what God had done throughout history. Faith in Jesus Christ was not about showing up at an hour-long meeting three times a month; it was about learning a new way of life and living it out.

My encouragement this morning is this: if you want to persevere in your faith when life gets hard, get to know your faith deeply. We've had about 8-9 people attending Bible studies as we've gone through *The Story* together, and I can't tell you just how pleased I am they've done that and how much their knowledge of the faith has grown. But even if your Wednesdays are full and you can't make a study, I'm telling you, make it happen. We will be starting a family study in the fall. I'm available throughout the week to meet with you. I've got the time, I will make the time, to help you know your faith. It's OK to ask questions; it's OK not to know all the answers. The only thing that's not OK is to ignore your questions and hope they go away. Because I believe that in our lifetimes, our faith will be examined and questioned and even persecuted. Unless you know what you believe, you will be drowned in the waves of false teachings. To stand strong through the storm, you've got to know your faith.

Here's the second key to Paul's perseverance: his focus was rarely on himself but instead on sharing the Gospel with others. Even though Paul was in chains, he kept writing to churches and to his partners in the ministry like Timothy. If I'd been put in prison, I would have been like, "Timothy, get me out of here!" But Paul was deeply concerned that the various churches had a clear understanding of the faith. He kept going after beatings, whippings, stonings, and imprisonment because he was desperately concerned about the souls of others. There's no way he could have done that if he had been focused on himself first.

Jesus called us to die to ourselves, and the clearest way I believe we can see if we've done that is if our own self-interest is on the backburner. This is one of the hardest and most countercultural things we can do, and yet it is essential for every Christian disciple. Much of what has torn apart the Christian church over the years is a focus on self rather than on others. Christians often bicker about things like the music we sing and how long the service lasts. If we're not getting fed what we want, if the sermons aren't inspiring enough or the children's programs not big enough, we go somewhere else we think might please us more. We have that privilege because we live in a time where there are enough churches that you can pick and choose. But the Christian life has never been about your own satisfaction. We are called to be a community of believers not to be served, but to serve each other in community. I'll be talking about that a few weeks from now in our new series we'll be starting. But self-interest is not what builds a community of faith or shows a true commitment to Jesus Christ.

So what should we do instead to persevere like Paul? We look outward. We see what needs there are outside the walls of this building in our neighborhood and we volunteer to help. We start looking at other places, other neighborhoods, other cities, other countries, and we get behind people who need help sharing the gospel across the world. We support them with prayers and encouragement and, when possible, time and money. When the Holy Spirit is working to build that others-focus within us, we will find our own centering not in our own desires but in God's desires. If we have taken the first step we talked about this morning, if we are rooted and grounded in our faith, then the Spirit will have fertile ground to move in us and stir in our hearts the desire to supply others with the riches we have found in Christ our Lord.

The final key I learned in my study of Paul was this: he lived out Jesus' command to live day by day without worry or fear. As Paul describes it, his life was full of things that would have terrified me. Here's what he says in 2 Corinthians 11:26 – "I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers." That's a whole lot of danger! But Paul's not worried. In the chapter we read this week, when he was on a boat in the middle of a raging sea, he reassured the sailors that God would protect them all.

As I see it, Paul doesn't fret because he lived his life confident of the promise of God every day. Paul is not coming up with anything new; he is simply following the teachings of Jesus, who told us not to worry about what we will eat or drink or what clothes we will wear...not to worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow has worries of its own. Jesus said, "But seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Paul put this into practice.

Many Christians, including some of us here today, live lives that do not reflect that we believe we are children of the almighty God. If we did believe it, we would not be so worried. We would know that every aspect of our lives is in His hands. When we worry, we don't share our faith for what people might think of us. When we worry, we don't give for fear that we won't have enough. When we worry, we don't participate because we think our skills aren't good enough or that we aren't useful enough. When we worry, we thwart God's plans for us.

But look at all God accomplished through Paul! And God can accomplish fantastic things through us, beyond what we can even imagine. But we've got to get past ourselves, past our overriding concern for self, and let God be God in our lives. What could this church be, what could this body of believers become, if we lived without fear? After church today, we're going to have a meeting about some major changes in our denomination, and they are cause for genuine concern...but they aren't cause for fear. Because God is our Savior and provider and king, nothing can stop us from doing His will! I see new churches around us growing and people coming to know God, all because they have given their worries and fears over to God. And the keys for us as a church family to persevere through the rough stuff is to know and stand on God's Word, to drop our self-orientation, and to give God all our concerns and fears and the petty stuff that gets in our way of really becoming His people.

If you search deep enough in your heart, you know you want this. You don't want to have a Christian life that peters out in disappointment or concern that you haven't done what God asks of you. No, all of us want to be like Secretariat, pulling hard, thirty lengths down the field, not stopping until we've won the race and received the crown of life Christ promised. So when you're down and disheartened, when you think that following Jesus is too hard, remember Paul and his faithfulness, and be encouraged. The same Holy Spirit that led Paul through countless trials to eternal victory is the same Holy Spirit that lives inside you and is spurring you on to that same victory in Jesus' name. Let's lace up our shoes and keep running towards the goal. Amen.