

The Twenty-Third Sunday of Pentecost

October 23, 2016

Prayer of the Day: God, our refuge and strength, have mercy on your Church, as we come in prayer before you. Answer us not in judgment on our sins, but in peace and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day: Alleluia! The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and bring me safely to his heaven kingdom. Alleluia! (2 Timothy 4:18)

Sermon Text: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Focus and concentration. Many sport psychologists and athletes agree those are the keys to winning competitions.

(<http://www.sportingnews.com/athletics/news/rio-olympics-2016-athletes-concentration-focus-sports-psychology/1ad532ki5qgic13n65x24ll37t>). British long-distance runner (and Olympic champion), Mo Farah says: *When I line up, I'm in a tunnel—I close everything and that tunnel is all you can see. That's what drives me and that's why I've become successful and won medals. But the day you feel like you can't see straight ahead of you — you can see corners and stuff— that's when you have to hang it up.* (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/olympics/2016/08/21/mo-farah-still-has-the-tunnel-vision-to-go-for-his-fourth-olympi/>).

During the August Olympics, did you see that focus? Athletes pop out of a tunnel, trotting around with these mammoth-sized headphones and sweat-suits draped over their bodies. And their eyes— do you see the look in their eyes? Those athletes are not searching the grandstands for friends or fans. They are not mesmerized by the color of the track or the size of the pool. They are not even looking at their competition! They have a blank stare! Their attention flips through what their arms and legs, thinking and breathing must do in order to run the race. This is it. They have one chance to compete and one chance to complete the race.

No wonder Paul compares life to a race! You have one life, one chance to compete. You have one life, one chance to complete the race. You have one life, one chance to

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

⁶ For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ 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. ...

¹⁶ At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. ¹⁷ But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

receive the winner's crown! So, are you *focused on the fight*? Are you sure nothing is distracting you from *finishing the race*? Is your life **RUNNING TO GET THE CROWN**?

Can you imagine Paul's concentration, his focus? Four dull-gray cinder-block walls box him in. Outside his cell a stone grinds a sword to a fine, sharp edge. Chains clink and clank every time he moves. Even when he looks down to write this letter, the cuff clasp on his wrist reminds him that he is a prisoner. Someone will execute him and still he scribbles: **"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."**

Paul's days are coming to an end. He compares finishing life to an athlete who runs towards the finish line. Notice what he says about reaching that goal: **"[I fight] the good fight."** An athlete does not automatically win a race just because he showed up. He must run. He must compete. He must fight (during the race) to win.

Of course, Paul is not talking about running a real-life race. He compares life to a race. You live for 10, 20, 40, 60, or 90-years—and that time is a chance for you to know how heaven becomes your own. Yes, baptism creates the trust in your heart to know Jesus is your Savior from sin. That means to this day you continually believe heaven awaits you at the end of life. Do you always remember that? Or do you have to fight to remember?

What would happen if, when running, the athlete suddenly cocks his head and waves to mom and dad in the crowd? He is running the race— but what is going to happen? He can run out of bounds and disqualify himself. He could run into someone, get tangled up, and fall down. He could lose the race— all because he got distracted.

The devil knows. That is why he tempts you. If he can distract you and take your focus off from your Savior, then he can get you to lose the race. Where does he draw your attention? Is he persuading you that tragedy is evidence that God does not love or care about you? Does he have you caught up in the lie: "You can reject the need to worship and still be a Christian" (compare with [Romans 10:17](#) and [Hebrews 10:25-27](#)). Is he pointing at your blessings and whispering: "Why does God need your money? Does he not already have enough?"

Your enemy is the devil ([1 Peter 5:8](#)) and he does everything possible to distract you! He knows if he can get you to take your eyes off the crown of righteousness, then you will not consider heaven all that important. Your heart will love whatever joys you find in this life. If you do not consider eternal life important, then you will not fight to obtain, to strive after it. If you do not care about your life after death, then you will lose the crown of righteousness. Your enemy, the devil, *fights* you in order to take your *focus off the fight* of faith!

That is why Paul pictures life like a race— because you can lose the race! So, he speaks to you, as if running next to you, and encourages: **"RUN TO GET THE CROWN!"** Because when you leave this life there will be a winner's crown.

That crown is only placed on the heads of those the Lord calls “righteous.” Do you remember what that word means? What is the word you see in “righteous?” [The word:] “Right.” Jesus is “right” or “without fault” in the sight of God; he is “righteous”— or, as Paul calls him: **the Righteous Judge**.

Jesus is the only One without sin— and yes, like you and me, he is tempted to sin. The devil meets him in the desert for forty days. He tries to distract Jesus and get him to find contentment in the wealth of earthly kingdoms. Yet, your Jesus knows heaven holds perfection— something money cannot buy ([Matthew 4:8-10](#)). So, the devil tells Jesus that God has no time for him— that God cannot feed him with bread ([Matthew 4:1-4](#)). Yet, your Jesus knows God does care. In fact, your God cares so much about you that he makes heaven a place without pain or suffering.

That is why Jesus *focuses on his fight*. He resists the temptations of the devil so that his righteousness may be your righteousness. We are the ones who are so often distracted in life and find our blessings more important than God. God has every reason to disqualify us from heaven. Instead, he disqualifies Jesus and abandons on the cross.

Because Jesus is disqualified, you are not. You are able to **RUN TO GET THE CROWN**. Jesus has lifted off your un-righteousness. On Easter Sunday, Jesus rises from the dead, comes out from his grave, and holds this splendid, brilliant crown of righteousness— the crown he won. And then he says: “This is for you!”

RUN TO GET THE CROWN! *Focus on the constant fight* against temptations. Continue fighting so that you to *finish the race!*

We know Jesus has forgiven our sins. You hear that comforting assurance every Sunday! You hear the peace of God’s forgiveness announced to you by friends! You know, that right now, you stand as an heir of eternal life! Still, we are not in heaven yet. You still live; you may have 10, 20, 40, 60, or 90-years left to live! So, *Finish the race!*

Paul recognizes that we can grow tired of running. Our attentions can find love in money or family or your personal time. You may struggle inside because you recognize you do the wrong you should not do and fail to do the good you should do! ([Romans 7:14-25](#)) So, how can you wake up every morning and to live the life God wants? Well, do not answer by looking at yourself. Start by looking at your God. He is your reason you live this life of faith.

The more you focus on the free gift of eternal life Jesus has given you, the more you will love his appearing. That is why Paul, even though he is executed for following Jesus, can look forward to eternal life. He says in verse 17: **But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.** You know, Paul stood before the most powerful men in the ancient world. How would you defend your faith? Where do you get the strength to confess what you believe? How do you know what to say? **“The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength,”** he says.

The same Lord stands at your side and gives you strength for your earthly race. You can be sure you will face temptation. Sometimes tragedy will turn your life upside down. You will feel that God has forsaken you. You will feel exhausted, angry, unloved by God. If sin has affected your life, if someone else's sin has made you a victim, your God reveals that he has conquered sin. Yes, that means you will spend eternity in heaven. Even now—the God who has the power to conquer sin has the same power to strengthen you throughout life now. He gives you the strength to trust his Word. He gives you the strength to remain confident that he has not left you. He gives you the strength to speak at the right time with the right words.

He still stands by your side even when you are terrified. If you are worried right now, is it because you are looking to yourself for answers? You may fear that God is distant from your life, that he does not care about your anxieties. Yet, God stands beside you as he says he does. He has and will provide for you just as he promises ([Psalm 145:15-16](#)). He makes things work for your good just as he guarantees ([Romans 8:28](#)).

Yes, he will continue strengthening you even in the weeks to come. After three presidential debates, countless television ads, and non-stop media coverage, you might wonder where your nation is heading. Not just the nation at large— but how your nation's government affects your individual freedoms. **The Lord [stands] at [your] side and [gives you] strength.** Strong enough to know that life is a race— you have not reached the finish line yet. You will. When you do, the crown of righteousness awaits you!

That really changes your focus on life , does it not? It means that you continue enjoying the blessings in your life. You do deeply love your family and friendships. Use God's gift of money to serve him and to relax. At the same, keep your eyes locked to *finish the race*. This is the goal God has lit up before you. **The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.**

No wonder Paul compares life to a race! Focus and concentration— those are the keys to winning the race. So, Olympic athletes lock their attention on the race at hand. They are not searching the grandstands for friends or fans. They are not mesmerized by the color of the track or the size of the pool. They are not even looking at their competition! They have a blank stare! Their attention flips through what their arms and legs, thinking and breathing must do in order to run the race. This is it. They have one chance to compete and one chance to complete the race.

You have one life, one chance to compete. You have one life, one chance to complete the race. You have one life, one chance to receive the winner's crown! So, *Focus on the fight! Finish the race!* Your Jesus has already won it for you—and now, you **RUN TO GET THE CROWN!**