

FINISH LINE FAITH

Regardless of what the personal course and map of our life's course looks like, we will all reach a finish line.

George Bernard Shaw once said "*death is the ultimate statistic. One out of one will die.*"

It's because everyone dies that **Solomon** said in **Ecclesiastes 7:2** that it's more beneficial to spend time at funerals than at parties, because everyone should take the reality of death to heart.

But the finish line and how we'll finish life isn't often at the top of our thoughts.

Taking the long view of life isn't easy. Our vision gets obscured by daily demands:

The tyranny of the urgent. The cravings of the flesh. The shouting of the world.

John Maxwell has said – "*The person who forgets the ultimate is a slave to the immediate*"

How do we foster a faith that keeps the ultimate in view? How do we play the long game?

How do we develop a daily faith that's built for the finish line?

Paul is writing to his protégé Timothy in **2 Timothy 4:6-7** when he considers his finish line: *As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful.*

It's his last known letter, as he was in prison awaiting his execution.

Now it's not likely any of us will experience a martyr's death for our faith.

Hopefully none of us will be imprisoned for our faith.

But I come to tell you tonight: **We'll all have a life sentence.**

In the end, most of our lives and our contributions will commonly be summed up in 1 sentence.

Who was George Washington? Who was MLK Jr.?

No matter how big the icon, the answer is often brief. Each gets a headline for what they did.

In **Acts 13:36**, Paul is preaching when he makes mention of King David, and in summation of his life, he says of David – "*He served the purpose of God in his own generation.*"

- I'm not sure there's a more desirable epitaph.

We're going to get to King David, the most recognizable king in Israelite history tonight.

But first I want to start with one you may not have heard of – King Uzziah.

King Uzziah is one of the greatest kings of the OT that nobody knows about. Crowned king at 16 years old, he was a prodigy the likes of LeBron James. He reigned for over 50 years with wisdom and riches that approached that of Solomon, and with the military prowess not unlike a King David. He had a great run. He sought the Lord and was richly blessed.

Then he became powerful. Then he became prideful.

And he fell from great heights because he forgot God.

God gave him leprosy due to his prideful sins. And his epitaph was, according to scripture, no more than: "**Here lies Uzziah, he died a leper.**"

(There's a whole separate sermon here for another time...)

There's so many sermons and books on holding onto God in suffering.

I wonder if we don't need more about holding onto Him when things are good.

I think we sometimes overlook the profound nature of what Paul says in Philippians 4 when he says I have learned the secret to being content in Christ in any situation, in plenty or in want.

We focus on being content in Christ when we don't have a lot. We fight to be content when we are in want, as we should. But what about when we have a lot, and we become content in what we have... and no longer find our joy and security in Christ. In our culture there's just as many if not more Uzziahs who become powerful and become prideful and are toppled before the finish line. Their faith fizzles.)

Uzziah isn't alone amongst his peers either. There were many OT Kings like Uzziah that lived lives full of both good and bad. But they again and again go down in the Bible in one sentence summations as good or bad kings.

A lifetime of activity. But one legacy.

It's this potent reminder that we'll all have a life sentence. What will yours say?

I don't know how my story will end. But it will never read "He gave up."

A life of following Christ is a long haul. It's a marathon that requires endurance, not just a short burst and a sprint. We may hit the wall. We will certainly be pushed to the limit.

How we respond in those moments determines our life sentence, our legacy, and our finish line.

1 Samuel 30:1-6

...And David was greatly distressed; for the people spoke of stoning him because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters. But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.

His city was burnt, his loved ones gone, the sons and daughters of his comrades were all captive and little Ziklag, where they had made a home, smoked before them in blackened ruins. The men of war- utterly distraught- mutinied against their leader and were ready to stone him.

David. Was. Distressed.

We have to turn back a few chapters to see how he got here.

David had been anointed by God to follow Saul on the throne.

God's overwhelming favor on David's life drives Saul mad, and Saul tries to kill him again and again. David is running from Saul as he had been for at least a year when we turn to 1 Samuel 27

1 Samuel 27:1 – *“David said in his heart, “Now I will die one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me inside the borders of Israel, and I will escape from his hand [once & for all].”*

Again we see it - David was distressed.

He was tired. Worn out. Distressed. Discouraged. Despondent. And afraid.

Fear had wrestled his faith to the ground.

Why do I say that? What's notably absent from this passage?

David's habit of consulting his Good Shepherd, his God.

He consults his fear instead and flees to the enemy of God's people. The Philistines.

I can't pretend to know what God's plan was for David's life, but this move doesn't progress well. It escalated to the point he was ready to march with the Philistines into the very battle King Saul and his son- David's best friend- Jonathan would die in. That would have been a stain on David's life. Yet he was saved from it when the Philistines didn't trust him enough to have him at their side in battle.

He chose his own path, and it seems in chapter 30 to have undone him.
His life and loved ones were kidnapped with the remains up in smoke.

And whether it was God's plan to have him there in that moment or not, one thing is sure-
In life the road will get hard. There will be inclines. There will be walls you hit.
Whether it's due to your own foolishness and failings
Or it's resistance or obstacles on your path to God's callings
We'll come against resistance.

What will you do? How will you respond?
We'll come across distressing and discouraging times in life,
Less like running and more like wading through mud...

Make no mistake. God's faithful mess up big time. They mess up often.
But one thing the faithful don't do. They don't give up.
They have a finish line faith.

David in 1 Sam 30 is again distressed, discouraged, but this time- not despondent.
I want to spend time digging into 6 simple words:

“David encouraged himself in the Lord.”

We don't know what David was saying in his heart.
But instead of following its impulses, he interrupts.

I read that and I often wonder - what did this look like?
I selfishly hope it was literally him talking to himself, because I'm known to do that.

Psychologist says it's good; speaking out loud can help you organize your thoughts, decide what you want, and set goals. Talking to yourself also helps you concentrate. It speeds up response times. It helps us process information.

Get caught talking to yourself? You feel judged. (You probably are judged).
But experts say everyone does it. Some of us just do it quieter.

“Internal Monologue”- when people are around, we just move that talking out loud into our head.
(aka our “inner voice”) (aka “private speech”)
The same part of the brain used when you talk out loud is used by your inner voice.

“David encouraged himself in the Lord.”

I want to master this –encouraging myself in the LORD. Making fear flee. Having a faith that rises up in the face of long odds, and doesn’t shrink back.

That’s the kind of faith that gets us to the finish line.

That’s the kind of faith that doesn’t flounder, falter, or fail.

The debate in the Church goes on about once saved always saved... can you fall away?

Here’s what all can agree on - a saving faith is one that endures to the end.

Once saved, always following.

Salvation is a posture of repentance and pursuit of Christ that lasts a lifetime.

The wall. Hard times. They don’t derail a faith’s pursuit.

Those that walk away from God in discouragement and disillusionment because of hard times and suffering don’t do it because life’s challenges were too hard. They do it because their faith wasn’t genuine, finish line faith.

In life, like David, we will come to moments that are discouraging and we need encouragement.

And in life, hopefully we surround ourselves with others who will encourage us.

But certainly there will be times in life where we have to encourage ourselves.

During much of his flight from Saul mighty men had joined him.

They’d been an encouragement to him. They’d fought valiantly for him.

Yet here even they had turned on him.

David was on an island in need of encouragement.

He could sink into the black hole of despondency.

Or he could fight back. Encourage himself.

Too often we let discouragement be the dominant discourse in our head.

When times get hard and when discouraging situations arise, what’s the common narration that starts in your mind?

Is it discouraging? Or is it encouraging?

The mature believer will take ownership of their encouragement.

“David encouraged himself in the Lord.”

What was he saying?

We don’t know for sure. Never will. But we’ve got a good idea. Why?

We have David’s journal of prayers. An entire book of 150 Psalms.

In **Psalm 42** when David interrupts himself in verse 5,

“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?”

First he interrupts the voice of discouragement.

Then he points to THE LORD.

***No voice is more influential in your life than your own.
Because nobody talks to you more than you do.***

If you aren't careful the dominant discourse in your mind becomes discouragement.

Preach to yourself.

You don't need to be ordained to a pulpit to speak life.

The most important pulpit I step to is in my mind, where I exhort, edify, and encourage myself.

The most important voice in your life is your own. Because nobody talks to you more.

Learn to encourage yourself.

Paul in Philippians- another letter written in prison- in ch. 4- "*you were right to encourage me.*"

Vs. 11-13

Not that I speak from [any personal] need, for I have learned to be content [and self-sufficient through Christ, satisfied to the point where I am not disturbed or uneasy] regardless of my circumstances. I know how to get along and live humbly [in difficult times], and I also know how to enjoy abundance and live in prosperity. In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret [of facing life], whether well-fed or going hungry, whether having an abundance or being in need. I can do all things [which He has called me to do] through Him who strengthens and empowers me [to fulfill His purpose—I am self-sufficient in Christ's sufficiency; I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him who infuses me with inner strength and confident peace.]

"Not that I speak from any personal need..." "...I am self-sufficient in Christ's sufficiency"
Paul is saying I rejoice in your encouragement. But even IF nobody were to encourage me, I've learned to encourage myself in Jesus Christ.

We can choose fear. Or we can choose faith.

We can choose discouragement. Or we can choose to encourage ourselves in the LORD.

Circumstances don't rob us of faith. It's our perspective of them and the way we interpret them, and dialogue about them in our head that commits the robbery.

Discouragement is a loss of perspective sparked by stark circumstances.

Encouragement is often found in restoring perspective.

That's given by God's truth, and His word.

The Faith Triangle...

Hearing the word initiates faith. (*Faith comes by hearing...*)

Speaking the word activates faith. (*I believed, therefore I have spoken - Ps 116*)

Doing the word demonstrates faith. (*Faith without works is dead...*)

So often we skip speaking the word. Speaking to circumstances with scripture and in prayer.

Prophesying over our own life. Changing the dominant dialogue in our head.

I want to run down three scriptures of David's that can serve you well to encourage yourself in the LORD.

“The LORD will fulfill his purposes for me...”

Fear is a false prophet.

It tells you in 100 different ways: *“God won’t be faithful to you.”*

“His promises and purposes will fail you.”

Eventually repeating the same lies over you and your situation can become a false prophecy.

It becomes a false belief. It shapes our reality. It cripples our faith.

That’s why we have to interrupt the dialogue of discouragement.

“The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places...”

We get caught looking over the fence... on where the lines have fallen for other people.

We need to step out of the comparison trap, looking outside our boundary lines, and...

Start thinking inside the box again.

Everything we need to unlock what’s in our hearts God will put in our hands.

Nehemiah was faithful as a cupbearer.

Joseph was faithful as a prisoner with a broom.

David... faithful in exile, would one day sit on the throne.

We overestimate what we would do with what we don’t have.

We underestimate what we can do with what we have.

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.

“you prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies...”

God had been present in the presence of the lion and bear.

In the presence of the giant Goliath.

In the presence of the king who tried to spear him repeatedly.

In the presence of caves, damp, dark, and depressing.

He rescued me then.

Will he not rescue me now?

You no doubt have walked through valleys before. Through hardship. Through pain.

God was faithful then.

But we get spiritual amnesia.

Paul says give thanks in every circumstance. Not because God needs the praise.

It’s because we need the reminder. We need to remember the faithfulness of God.

Journals aren’t for everyone. But they serve this purpose. They record lists of God’s faithfulness.

Mine aren’t Psalms. Mine don’t turn into songs. But one man’s did...

“It is Well”

In the 1870s Horatio Spafford was a successful Chicago lawyer and a close friend of evangelist Dwight L. Moody. Spafford had invested heavily in real estate, but the Chicago fire of 1871 wiped out his holdings. His son had died shortly before the disaster.

Spafford and his family desperately needed a rest so in 1873 he planned a trip to Europe with his wife and four daughters. While in Great Britain he also hoped to help Moody and Sankey with their evangelistic tour. Last minute business caused Spafford to delay his departure, but he sent his wife and four daughters on the S. S. Ville Du Havre as scheduled, promising to follow in a few days. On November 22 the ship was struck by the English ship Lochearn, and it sank in twelve minutes. Several days later the survivors landed at Cardiff, Wales, and Mrs. Spafford cabled her husband the brief message, "Saved alone."

When Horatio Spafford made the ocean crossing to meet his grieving wife, he sailed near the place where his four daughters had sunk to the ocean depths. There, in the midst of his sorrow, he wrote these unforgettable words that have brought solace to so many in grief:

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.
Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blessed assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.*

I can hardly fathom the ability to pen something so beautiful in such raw agonizing pain.
But I've also been reading Job in my reading plan.
This was a man who had to encourage himself.
His friends told him he must have had loads of hidden sin.
Job's wife told him to cuss God and die.
Not exactly rallying encouragement!!

Job cries out to God. Questions God. Shouts out to God. Curses the day he was born. Listen to this 4 verse sample in Job 19:

Job 19:7-10

*"I cry out, 'Help!' but no one answers me. I protest, but there is no justice.
God has blocked my way so I cannot move. He has plunged my path into darkness.
He has stripped me of my honor and removed the crown from my head.
He has demolished me on every side & I am finished. He has uprooted my hope like a fallen tree*

Yet he interrupts himself...

Job 19:25-27

*"But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,
And he will stand upon the Earth at last.
And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God!
I will see him for myself. Yes, I will see him with my own eyes.
I am overwhelmed at the thought!"*

What is discouraging you right now?
What does it look like for you to interrupt yourself?

You can love your life and follow Christ in faith even if nothing changes on the outside.
Because you change the discourse on the inside from one of discouragement, to encouragement.

One practical way...

“I believe, therefore I’ve spoken...”

What do you need to speak over your life again?

Second...

David goes on to ask God if he should pursue the enemy, and he does just that.

Often it’s positive obedient actions that cast down discouragement.

What can you be obedient to right now?