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INTRODUCTION

Scripture is filled with behind-the-scenes accounts of individual's lives. As we get to know people through their fascinating life experiences and responses, we also discover that the Lord placed their stories in the Bible for a purpose. In speaking about the Israelites of the Old Testament, Paul explains,

*"Now these things happened as examples for us,
that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved.
And do not be idolaters, as some of them were....
Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did
Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did.....
Nor grumble, as some of them did....
Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.
Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."*
(I Corinthians 10:6-12)

In order to keep from "*falling*" in our Christian walk, we should "*take heed*" to the individual stories of those who have gone before us.

Throughout this study we will meet scores of people; examining where they were successful, and seeing where they failed. Based upon their experiences we will design strategies for ourselves that will help us to persevere as we "*run the race set before us*" (*Hebrews 12:1*).

Those individuals who were successful are demarked by ☺.

Those who experienced failure are noted as ☹.

As believers the Lord has "*begun a good work*" in our lives; let's make it our prayer in the coming weeks to cooperate with Him, and cling to Him, as He "*works in (us), both to will and to work for His good pleasure*" (*Philippians 1:6; 2:13*).

O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love:
Here's my heart, O take and seal it, Seal it for Thy courts above.

Robert Robinson; "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing"

CHAPTER ONE

“Running the Race”

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith,”

(Hebrews 12:1, 2a)

- Was there a time when you were more on fire for Jesus than you are today?

When we first fall in love with the Lord we smile at the thought of what lies ahead; of the sheer adventurous delight of knowing Jesus and being used by Him every day until our final breath. In our hearts we crave living significant lives that count for eternity.

We want to *“finish well.”*

Do you remember the excitement that you felt as a new believer when you imagined your future? Did you see yourself growing stronger in the Lord, gaining spiritual momentum, and accelerating in a blaze of glory across the finish line of life with a shout of victory?

Maybe you identify with the person who said;

“Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid into Heaven broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, thankfully and loudly proclaiming --- ‘WOW, What a ride!’”

To *“finish well”* means that what we are going full throttle in pursuing the Lord and accomplishing the goal that He has for our lives. With resolute hearts and focused intensity we are running full steam ahead in God’s will. To *“finish well”* means that we are *“pleasing to the Lord”* because we glorify Him in fulfilling the purpose and design for which we were created (*II Corinthians 5:9*).

Let's face it; if we're really in love with Jesus, we deeply yearn for intimacy with Him that is ablaze with purpose and passion! We want to remain "hot" for Him, with joy igniting our souls every day of our lives.

Of course we want to "*finish well!*"

God wants us to "*finish well,*" too. He doesn't want us to be "*stagnant in spirit*" (*Zephaniah 1:12*), and it delights Him to see us persevere (*Hebrews 10:38*). He has planned for our success by already equipping us with everything that we need to keep from stumbling and to experience victory (*II Peter 1:3, 4, 11*).

The Lord wants us to "*finish well*" because He is waiting to reward those who are steadfast (*I Corinthians 3:12, 13*). Throughout Scripture God makes a point of promising that the investment of faithfully living today will yield an eternity of enjoying His presence and lavish rewards (*Matthew 25:23; I Corinthians 2:9*).

We want to "*finish well,*" and the Lord is cheering for us every step of the way.

But we cannot "*finish well*" if we have never "*started well.*" We must begin by being certain that we are heading in the right direction, traveling down the right road.

What do the verses below reveal about the path that we're to follow?

1. **John 14:4-6**
2. **Jeremiah 6:16**

Has there been a time in your life when you received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, and surrendered your life to Him? If so, briefly record that event below:

Jesus paid the penalty of death that we owe for our sin so that we can enjoy an eternity of joy with Him. In response to His great sacrificial love, our heart's overwhelming desire is to walk with Him all of the days of our life.

3. Psalm 27:4

What one thing does David ask of God?

4. Psalm 119:33, 111, 112

How long does the writer plan on walking with the Lord?

Jesus' disciples were on fire for the Lord after His resurrection. They said that their "*hearts were burning*" within them (*Luke 24:32*). Have you ever experienced that level of intensity in your own relationship with Jesus?

But, even the most intense fire tends to cool down and burn out. If fresh fuel is not constantly added to the furnace of our souls, then the fires on the altar of our hearts become flickering embers, bearing ashes that blow away with the wind.

It is shocking to realize that barely one-third of the individuals whose lives are highlighted in Scripture actually "*finish well*." The Bible reveals that an overwhelming percentage of those who at one time walked with the Lord eventually fell away; and most of those failed in the last half of their lives. What a tragedy!

Sincere Christians throughout the ages have anticipated "*finishing well*," and the writer of Hebrews urges us to "*hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering*" (*10:23*). Yet, the sad fact is that many who start out strong in their Christian life stumble and fall.

"Most people probably have heard of Billy Graham, but have you heard of Chuck Templeton or Bron Clifford? Did you know that all three of these men, while still in the middle twenties, were packing out auditoriums in 1945?"

Chuck Templeton was called by many the most gifted, talented, young preacher in America. Templeton and Graham became very close friends and started preaching together with Youth for Christ. Most observers thought that Templeton would be the one who would go to the top.

Bron Clifford was another gifted, young evangelist. People would line up for hours to hear him preach.

At the age of twenty-five, Clifford touched more lives, influenced more leaders, and set more attendance records than any other clergyman in American history. He was tall, handsome, dashing, intelligent and sophisticated. Hollywood actually tried to cast him the the role for the famous movie, 'The Robe.' He seemed to have everything.

*"Finishing Well"
Judy Gerry; @ 2005*

Graham, Templeton and Clifford, launched out of the starting block like gold medallists in 1945. Why haven't you heard of Church Templeton and Bron Clifford?

By 1950, Templeton had left the ministry, became a radio newscaster, and told the world that he no longer believed Jesus Christ was the Son of God.

By 1954, Clifford had lost his family, ministry and health. At the age of thirty-five, this once-famous preacher died of cirrhosis of the liver, penniless and alone.

In 1945 all three of these gifted young men were preaching to thousands of people. But within ten years only one of them was still on track for Christ.

*In the Christian life it's not how you start but it's how you finish.”
(Steve Farrar, Finishing Strong; Multnomah Press, 1995)*

As you read the above story, what went through your mind? Check the statements below that best describe how you felt about these men's lives.

- I was angry with those two men; there is no excuse in their behavior.
- It caused me to thank God for those who successfully persevere; their examples encourage me.
- It made me sad to hear of men whose lives were so diminished by sin.
- That story scared me. It sounds like everyone has the potential of NOT “*finishing well*.”
- It made me appreciate God's mercy in my own life.
- I felt happy that my life is not like those two men's lives.
- I started to wonder what it was that led these men to take those first steps away from the Lord.

When we hear stories of those who do not “*finish well*” there are two basic responses. Some react like the Pharisee who said, “*God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people; swindlers, unjust, adulterers,r*” (Luke 18:11).

What does the Lord have to say about such a response?

5. I Corinthians 10:12

A second group of believers hear stories like the one above and respond very differently. They humbly cry out, “*God, be merciful to me, the sinner!*” (Luke 18:13). We are all vulnerable, and must depend completely on the mercy and grace of the Lord in order to “*finish well*.” Only as we recognize our personal weaknesses can we see the power of Christ in our lives (II Corinthians 12:9, 10).

Every person in themselves is capable of failure; yet the Lord is able to keep us from falling (*Jude 24, 25*). Our “*responsibility*” is to “*respond*” to “*God’s ability*” to strengthen us and make us stand. We must cooperate with the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives.

6. **Hebrews 10:35, 36** What do believers need?

No believer “plans to fail,” but we often “fail to plan.” If we want to “finish well” we must consider our own lives and ask;

- ✓ ***Why do some finish strong, while others do not?***
- ✓ ***Are there any steps that I can take today, that might help me to “finish well” tomorrow?***

Exploring what God says about these questions is what this Bible study is all about.

If we’re going to “*finish well*,” let’s start by finding out the basis of how the Lord will evaluate us at the “*finish line*.”

Jesus told a parable about three servants who received an evaluation from their Master. Based upon each of the slaves’ unique abilities, each had been given a certain amount of talents to invest while the master was away on a journey. When he returned, each of the three was called to give an account of the way that he invested his master’s resources.

7. **Matthew 25:20-23**

What commendation does the master give to two of the slaves?

According to verses 21 and 23, what is the basis of the master’s evaluation?

What is the reward for the faithful servants?

How encouraging to realize that it IS possible to “*finish well*” and hear our Master say, “*Well done!*” On the other hand, it is also possible to fail in the way that we

use what the Lord has given to us. Jesus condemns the servant who did not use the talents given to him by his master as being “*wicked and lazy*” (*Matthew 25:26*).

The Greek term for “*well done*” is an adverb that is always associated with an action. In the Christian walk, accolades require action! If we are going to hear the Master say “*well done*,” we must be DOING something – not just thinking about doing something. What we do and how we live helps to form the basis of Jesus’ evaluation of us when we meet Him at the “*finish line*.”

God cares about how we use the gifts and talents that He has entrusted to us. He cares about the smallest details in our lives (*Matthew 10:29*), because He has designed a purpose in everything. We’ve all been created in a unique way to bring glory to the Lord Jesus Christ (*1 Corinthians 10:31*).

What do the following verses reveal about God’s path and plan for your life?

8. Jeremiah 29:11

9. Ephesians 2:10

One way or another, every person will “*finish*” the journey of life. We all have an appointment to stand before the King (*Hebrews 9:27*). The choice before us every single day is, “*how will we finish?*” Will we finish well, or will we finish less than well? And that is a very serious question.

Even though the Christian life is designed to absolutely gush with joy (*Psalms 36:8*) and overflow in blessing (*John 10:10b*); even though our goal is to enter in to the joy of the Master (*Matthew 25:23*), Scripture speaks of the Christian’s life-journey using sober terms.

10. II Timothy 4:7

How does Paul describe his life?

The term “*race*,” or “*course*,” refers to a public athletic competition as used in the Greek games. The image is that of a stadium runner struggling before a crowd to propel himself to victory. Have you ever viewed your own life in these terms?

11. Acts 20:24

What types of things might comprise the elements of a person’s “*course*?”

Taking a look at your own life, identify some of the elements that seem to describe how you see your own “*course*” up to now.

In the space below, draw a picture that represents you yourself running your “*race*.” (Don’t worry, this won’t be graded!) Include in your drawing some of those elements that you just mentioned above.

The competitive runner prepares in every way for the contest. By preparing mentally, physically, emotionally, and even spiritually, a runner strategizes how to win the race, and then takes the necessary steps.

12. Hebrews 12:1

What two things are we to lay aside?

How are we to run?

The longer that we walk with the Lord, the more we recognize that this race is not a “*sprint*,” rather it is a “*marathon*.” We are in this for the long haul. In this race we do not know where the finish line actually is; it could be today, it could be eighty years from now. Our challenge is to persevere no matter how long the race continues.

We do not choose our race; it is “*set before us*” by the Lord Himself. Yet, we do choose how we run. What will be our attitude? How hard will we keep pushing forward? How much energy will we give to the race? Will we stay on track? What will occupy our minds as we run?

Describe Paul’s attitude and approach toward his race in the verses below.

13. I Corinthians 9:24-27

14. Philippians 3:12-14

It sounds like the Christian life is very demanding! The term used for “*race*” in the New Testament is the word “*agon*,” from where we get the word “*agony*!” There is strife or contention associated with this race. But the question arises; since we yearn to “*finish well*,” and God wants us to succeed (*I Thessalonians 4:3*), why is our “*race*” such a struggle? What’s going on? What’s the problem?

From Genesis to Revelation, the Lord reveals that we have an enemy who systematically ambushes us along the way.

15. I Peter 5:8-10

Why are we to have a sober spirit?

What should be our response to such attacks?

What group of people are specifically targeted by this enemy?

In verse 10, what words are used to describe the idea of “*finishing well*?”

16. Ephesians 6:10-12

Against whom are we struggling?

Against what are we to stand firm?

While the devil knows that he cannot rob us of the salvation purchased by the blood of Jesus, he schemes to have us make choices that don't glorify the Lord so that we forfeit the joy that God wants us experience in this life (*John 10:10b*). The enemy also wants us to make choices that will limit the rewards that Christ will present to us when we stand before Him one day (*II Corinthians 5:10*).

Paul maintains that “*we are not ignorant of (Satan's) schemes*” (*II Corinthians 2:11*).

The Greek word for “*schemes*” is the term “*methodeia*.” Satan methodically, and systematically, pursues his intended target using well thought out procedures. He is calculatedly wicked, tricky, and deceitfully shrewd.

During the coming weeks we will be looking into Scripture to identify some of the “schemes” that Satan uses to trip people up as they walk with the Lord.

We will study examples of biblical characters who fell into various snares, and examine the lives of others who successfully avoided those same weaknesses.

Our goal will be to design practical Scriptural strategies for our own lives that will help enable us to “finish well.”

In Hebrews 12:1 we are exhorted to “*lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us*” so that we can persevere in the race set before us. Each of us have unique “*encumbrances*” that slow us down, and “*sin*” that trips us up as we run.

An “*encumbrance*” literally means a “*bulk, weight, burden or impediment.*” An “*encumbrance*” might not even be “*sin,*” per se. It may be something in our lives that looks benign, neutral, or harmless. Some “*encumbrances*” may even qualify as “*good*” things. But what once may have seemed an insignificant issue in our lives becomes an “*encumbrance*” when it begins to hinder us from running our BEST race in the Christian life.

Take a moment and list a few “*good*” things that you think could potentially become an “*encumbrance*” in a Christian’s life.

- a.
- b.
- c.

We are also to lay aside “*the sin*” which so easily entangles us. To “*sin*” means that we are “*missing the true end and scope of our lives, which is God.*” Sin will surely derail us, and each of us has areas where we are more vulnerable to specific sins. The enemy will use these to trip us up time and time again.

If we are going to “*finish well,*” we have to “*lay aside*” these “*encumbrances*” and “*the sin which so easily entangles us.*”

17. Hebrews 12:2

On what should be our focus as we run our race?

It’s all about Jesus! He is the author of our faith; the One who initiated our relationship with Him (*John 15:16*). He has set our course before us (*Ephesians 2:8-10*).

He is also the perfecter of faith; the One who will finish the job! Yes, our acts of obedience demonstrate our trust and faith in Him (*James 3:18-22*), but He is the One who is really doing the work in and through us (*Philippians 1:13*).

If we ever take our eyes off of Him our hearts will slowly grow cold. It is dangerous for us to become “*cool*” in our relationship with our Savior, our Bridegroom, the lover of our souls!