

“Fighting the Good Fight of Faith”
Running the Race - Keeping the Faith

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Key Text: II Timothy: 3-7 and 4:6-8

I. Introduction - What I Learned Growing Up

On this Mother’s Day, I am reminded of the sacrifice my Grandmother Orndorff made to raise me when my parents divorced. She had raised 3 of her own in a dysfunctional household. My growing up was different because my grandfather died at 42 and my aunt, uncle, and dad all married very young – like 19 and 18.

My grandmother taught me how to be frugal but also generous. If a person is in deep debt, it becomes difficult to be generous. Getting and staying out of debt can lead to living a more generous life and you don’t have to work long hours or multiple jobs just to survive. We were financially poor by all standards, but always had enough and my grandmother enjoyed giving her produce to others.

I learned to work hard, tell the truth, learned lessons when I was disciplined when I said bad words or was mean spirited or when I got caught stealing one day. And somehow, she balanced discipline with grace. I knew she loved me and maybe some of the things she learned in raising her 3 she now had an opportunity to do different with me. That’s how life rolls. We can always learn from our failures to do better next time. She lost her 4th child at 2 or 3 days old, so maybe I got placed in that role by God.

What she did best was to make sure I went to church every Sunday to learn God’s Word in Sunday School and so I could learn about faith in God.

Like Timothy I was blessed to have a grandmother who had a sincere faith and love for God and her church that got me started on the right foot and in the right direction.

II. A Mothers Faith and Influence

My mother would remarry and started attending First Assembly of God – which was in stark contrast to her Church of Christ days when she grew up. That became a smaller part of my faith experience, but a part non the less. My mother and I still talk about God, faith and church life often. She listens well and continues to be supportive and I am sure worries about me and prays for us often. No, she is not happy about our moving to the “big” city. But she understands, and knows God has to have a plan for us all.

Paul saw how Eunice’s and Lois’ faith lived in his young mentee, Timothy. Paul wanted to encourage him to fan into flame the gift they had already nurtured in their son and grandson.

III. Who has Influenced You?

I do not know who has been praying for or who has prayed for you; who has nurtured you in faith; who encouraged or is encouraging you to attend worship, get involved or to fan into flame the gift they see God has placed in you – but I imagine we all have someone or maybe multiple someones.

I know that is what the motivation is for our College Aged Young Adult ministries. It's not just about signing and sending cards, having a Christmas party or college road trips with goodie bags. It's about building and growing relationships of love, faith and connection at a time when many in this age group 18 – 23 easily lose connection with God and church life. There is intention behind why people are called to share in this ministry.

The same is true for your Youth Encouragement Sponsor program – Yes! It's not just about praying for, sending notes of encouragement or small gifts. More deeply it's about letting our youth know someone cares for them, is thinking of them, hoping their relationship with Jesus is nurtured and fanned into flame.

IV. From Timidity to Courage!

God did not give us a spirit of timidity which is a lack of courage or confidence, Rather, God has given us, like Paul saw in Timothy, “a spirit of power, love and self-discipline.” We are each to be using the spiritual gifts and living into the call God has placed on our lives to be serving God, in the church, in our homes, in our community and work life. This, not as separate entities, but living our faith and calling out in congruence. We should be the same person on Monday at the office or in the classroom as we are on Sunday morning.

That's how we run our race of faith well. Some of you have run this race of faith longer than others. Hopefully we are still on the track and not in the bleachers. It's easy to want to sit in the bleachers and just watch and cheer for someone else. And from a physical perspective maybe it is easy for you to run or maybe the feet and knees hurt so badly it would be impossible to even think about running a literal race.

V. A Spiritual Race Marked out for Us

But this race Paul speaks of in Timothy is indeed a spiritual race. A sprint, a mile, maybe a marathon? How about a steeple chase? When we think about how we keep fighting the good fight of faith, we obviously need a lot of love, care, support and accountability to keep us on the track and moving forward. Why? Because life is not going to offer us a smooth highway. V-DOT builds a road, it is slick and smooth – the lines are easy to see so you don't veer off the road and you know when and when not to pass. Our tires hum going down the highway. Seasons come and go and what happens to the lines? They fade. What happens to the road with the hot and cold, rainy and snowy weather? Cracks, crumbling and worst of all, pot holes! VDOT has to send workers and materials to repair, mend or in many cases resurface, or rebuild the road. The old is gone, all things made new.

Life is just like that. The race of faith like that.

The steeple chase is named after the horse steeple chase. The longest is 3,000 meters. It consists of 28 – 35 barriers – hurdles if you will, and 7 water jumps and 7 laps. It's not the highlight of the Olympics, like the 4 x 100 team relay or the 100-meter dash. It is challenging and grueling. And it takes resilience.

This sounds more like what a race of faith would be like. The difference is these runners know what is coming. They know what they'll be facing on each lap. As we run the race of faith,

we might speculate but we never know what is over the next hill or around the bend. Highways get closed because of flood waters, landslides, and sink holes.

VI. Aspects of Paul's Race of Faith

Paul faced all types of trials, tribulations, and persecutions. He knew what it was to have plenty or to have little. He was hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, stuck-down but not destroyed. If he did trip and fall face down on the track – bruised, scraped up, humiliated he found a way to get back up and finish the race and to keep the faith. That in no way, shape, or form is easy.

How did he do it? How did he keep the faith that he was instilling in his spiritual son, Timothy? How did Paul “not lose heart” as so many of us tend to do?

Paul, like Timothy was taught the faith. He understood his Jewish heritage very well. But would testify that Jesus also “taught him by revelation.” (Galatians 1:11-17) And through that revelation Paul preached to the Gentiles.

Paul said, “he lived by faith and not by sight.” He said, “it is Christ’s love that compels us” to do the same. (II Corinthians 5:14-15) “That we are not to live for ourselves but for him who died for us and was raised again.”

The way we face our giants – the hurdles, the water obstacles, the pot holes of life is by preparing ourselves now for that which lies ahead. That is how Paul “pressed on” in the midst of adversity, heart ache and conflict, even when in his last days he was under house arrest in Rome.

He was blessed to have people who cared for him as he had cared for others. People prayed for him as he prayed for others.

He spent time with Jesus who helped him up, and “perfected” his faith and his convictions.

He also knew the final outcome of running the race well and finishing the course. That there was a prize at the end. And that this was not only true for him but for all who long for and look for the appearing of Christ.

VII. What's Our Prize?

This prize is not a participation trophy or a championship ring or a medal of honor. It is actually a crown of righteousness. Now I have no idea, if this is an actual crown or simply symbolic. A crown is not a hat, but headwear that often represents power, legitimacy, victory, honor and glory.

To me I think this crown Paul speaks of could mean these things. He’s run the race, finished the course, he speaks in his letters of “victory in Jesus” and how God raises the humble up to places of honor. I also think the crown Paul speaks of gets linked with eternal life and resurrection life. Paul knew whatever he faced, God would give him strength and courage to keep fighting the good fight of faith to the very end and he would one day cross that finish line and step into his heavenly home. This is what he hoped for for Timothy too. He knew it was not because of his own righteousness or any of his good works. Rather it was a gift of God. It is by

God's grace we are saved by faith. It's a combination of God giving us grace and gifts, fanning those gifts into flame with courage and confidence, running the race God has for us over hurdles, hills, pot holes and water obstacles, all the while keeping our eyes on the goal of the upward calling of Jesus Christ our Lord.

VIII. People Wo Pick Us Up and Run with Us.

Thank goodness God gives us mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers, aunts, uncles, spouses, kids, church family and friends, teachers, coaches – people filled with faith and courage; who have in many cases experienced some of life's hard knocks along the way, to come along side us, to at times pick and lift us up so we don't run the race alone.

Recently I was part of a 5k with Living the Dream to remember Ben Long and help raise funds and awareness of suicide, drug abuse and depression. I didn't go out to win the race. That was left to younger legs. I did bump into a person I knew who shared she was about to go into a 6-month treatment program. We ran that race together. I listened as she shared her challenges and struggles and how she wants to get better. I know why God had me run that race that day and trust me God always has something for us to learn as well. We ran the race for Ben and others. We shared the faith and hopefully kept it all the way around Yowell Meadow but maybe most importantly in our hearts and through our witness, and we did finish the race that day and felt pretty good about it.

A month later she called me from the Rehab center and said she was doing well. She has grandbabies you know, and she wants to be able to have a good life with them. She needed \$100 for her monthly living fees at the Rehab facility in Charlottesville. \$100 was sent to her from your gifts in Bucket Sisters so she can keep running her race of faith. I'm praying for her, you can too.

My prayer is each of us will keep on growing in faith, fanning into flame each day the gift God has given us. All the while with our eye on the goal of finishing the race well, always keeping the faith.

XI. Closing Prayer

Let us Pray:

Life sustaining God, thank you that on this Mother's Day we have scriptural examples of women who nurtured faith in their children. For all who have nurtured and encouraged us in our faith, we say thank you! In the days ahead help us think about the race we have been on thus far, and to keep training ourselves, along with others, for what we cannot yet see, but what life tells us is coming. And for those unforeseen obstacles, like a pot hole in the night that would serve to wreck us. And even if we do get wrecked and scraped and bruised, help us to know you are a healing and hope filled God – take the old and make it new.

In Jesus' Name,

Amen.