

Finish Strong

by

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"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Philippians 3:14 (ESV)

Several days ago we had our Influencers Leadership Retreat in California. It is our third year to have it in a Catholic retreat center overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Everyone who attended, and who I have spoken to, has told me that words cannot describe what they saw, heard, and experienced. Indeed, the Holy Spirit blessed us with His presence, and His leadership, and His inspiration. When it happens that the Holy Spirit is strongest in a retreat such as this, we will often see Him use people in a great way, not in their strength as a worship leader or speaker, but rather in their weakness and duress as they serve. In many ways, they are used more profoundly than when they are on their "A Game." This was the case with our worship leader, Sam Parsons.

Sam is a man about my age (70), and he might be the best I have ever followed to be led to worship. He is indeed a leader of worship, and not just a worship leader. True to his calling and use of his gift, the guy and the band really took us to the throne of God during our retreat. What was not known, and was secretly observed by me, is the fact that Sam was in pain all weekend. I saw this in a private time when Sam did not know I was watching. I inquired and he shared that he had been having some kind of gastric pain in his chest area for days. He was scheduled to see a doctor after the retreat. But he wanted to give it his best for his King, although in his mind it wasn't his best. Believe me, it was his best, for it showed the man's heart, his love for Christ, and his love for the men there.

As I watched this hero of the faith serve us and run his race in the best way he could, my mind went back to my freshman year in college and playing football there. Those were tough, hard years for football players, for the training regiments were about separating less committed players from those who would never give up. Freshmen players were ineligible for varsity games in those years. Division One schools had almost unlimited scholarships they could offer, if they had the money to pay for it. Therefore, it was common to have about seventy young freshmen on the practice field trying to prove themselves to the coaches. My school, Ole Miss, was on top of the charts in those days, and they could sign any good athlete they wanted in Mississippi. They signed a lot of men. However, by the start of our sophomore year, only about thirty players returned to complete their scholarship. Why is this?

I spoke with the current defensive coordinator at Ole Miss and he observed the men playing in college

football today are bigger, stronger and faster than in my day, for coaches understand nutrition and weight training better now than then. These things can help athletes. Then he said, "But the guys in your day were tougher." As soon as he said this, I recalled my freshman year again. In my mind I heard the coach telling us when we were running our wind sprints, *"Run all the way through the finish line. Don't give up. Don't quit. Finish strong!"* If we did not run hard and through the finish, but instead coasted, we would have to repeat it until we got it right, or we quit the team. Now understand that we were running those fifty-yard wind sprints in ninety degree temperatures with ninety percent humidity at the end of a two-hour practice. We had been given no water. We had been beating up on each other during that time, and many were often injured. Then we were told to not coast through the finish line when some guys could only crawl through it. I will not get into the other things required. But you can get the picture why sixty percent of the original freshman players dropped out, even leaving their scholarships behind. Do you also see that the coaches wanted to discover those players who would not quit when their bodies and minds said, "quit!" and when other men around them were dropping out like flies? The coaches were looking for a certain kind of man to go to the next level where we would be taught how to play football on a national stage, and against similar guys like us. We were tough. Our competition was tough. We were all great athletes to make it to that point. But the players who won the game were men who would not give up, but would fight to the end. Now here is a big question. If a football coach, a football team, or even our employer can demand such dedication and we give it, should not the King of Kings receive from us at least the same dedication? Are any of you coasting instead of giving it your best?

I think that this voice is spoken to me even now when I am tired, sick, or discouraged and want to quit, *"Run all the way through the finish line. Don't give up. Don't quit. Finish strong."* It gets me up. It reminds me Who I am playing for. It reminds me of who I am. It reminds me that there is a finish line ahead, somewhere out there, and until my King says, "Hit the showers!" I must run my race all the way through that finish line.

I see men Sam's and my age who say they are followers of Christ and will serve Him, but they get to this time in life and they drop out. They take their leisure. They become self-absorbed with the use of their time, and have no concern for what their Savior asks them to do with their life. *"Run all the way through the finish line. Don't give up. Don't quit. Finish strong,"* is a nice thing for the other guys, and as long as it doesn't require much sacrifice on their part they will show up and act the part. But, when it gets hard and dedication becomes a negotiation, we see many simply fade out instead of being *a fire* for their King. I don't get it? Do they not understand that this time of life could be the best time of life if they will stay in the game and run all the way through the finish line? What will it take to understand that this life is a dress rehearsal for eternity, and the tests and challenges we have prepare us for something greater each stage of life? What will it take for these older men, or even young men who are trampled under the cares of the world that saps their strength and resolve, to run their race all the way through the finish line? Look what the writer of Hebrews encouraged:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 12:1-2 (ESV)

What do we see here? We read, *“Lay aside the sin and the distractions that make us want to quit. Run the race and do not give up. Run with endurance, for it is a long race. And when we become discouraged we are to fix our eyes on Christ who stands at the finish line.”* Guys, if you will listen closely, you will hear that this is the voice of Jesus telling His disciples, His players the same things my coach said. It is His voice that tells us not to slack off. Do not coast. Finish strong.

Several days ago, I saw a man in California leading our worship who gave it his best when it was painful to do so, and because of it, we were taken to a place that no man can lead us to. In his weakness and his most trying time, Sam was used to show us what true dedication looks like. This is the kind of man God will use to accomplish great things, for he wouldn't give up. No wonder we experienced something great at our retreat.

Here's the good news. You can be this kind of man too. But to be this man, God will test you to see if you will be willing to stand up to what it takes to make you ready for the next level where He will use you for the big games. Will you ask Him to make you into the man who can compete on that level? That is the first step. Will you take the initiative to suit up and tell Jesus that you are ready to let Him prepare you for representing Him well? He will take you from that point and make you into this kind of man, provided that you *“Run all the way through the finish line. Don't give up. Don't quit. Finish strong.”* Those are the kind of men needed in this world that we live in today, and the men He is looking for to prepare them to impact it. Be that man.