



Finishers

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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AM Assembly



Introduction:

A life cut short is hard. Death is tough no matter when it comes. But when it is a strong young man cut down in his prime because of an innocent mistake, we are often left wondering and pondering. Some of us are aware of just that kind of situation taking place last Sunday. Twenty-five year old Adam Smelser, son of Scott Smelser a gospel preacher in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and nephew of Tim Smelser who used to preach at the South Boone congregation in our area, went missing. It had warmed up in Bowling Green last Sunday and he was apparently unaware of the coming storms. He decided it was a good time to go out for an exercise swim. He had done it before, swimming in a nearby river, increasing his strength by swimming against the current just below some rapids. He was unaware, however, of the dangers of swimming in this location due to the rain-caused higher water levels. It seems he was caught in an undertow, pulled under, sucked into an eddy that pushed him down and wouldn't let him up. Two riverside witnesses looked up as they heard shouts in the water. They made eye-contact and then watched him go under. He never came back up. His body was found on Thursday. It is a real life example of the Preacher's words in **Ecclesiastes 9:11**: "Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all" (ESV).

Adam's father, Scott Smelser, posted a statement on Facebook this past week to respond to so many that had contacted him. Listen to some of what he said: "I read this morning that another comment Adam made in Bible class Sunday morning, was to the effect: 'We are not made for this world.' My son's wisdom and zeal comfort me greatly. Do not mistake this to mean I am not suffering. Any father knows better. I am crying as I write this. But my son made these insights in Bible class, assembled with saints for worship, sang, prayed, and partook of the Lord's Supper. Then he went home, and went out for a swim. Alone. In a faster current than usual. That means that he won't finish some of his earthly goals. He will not do his research experiment. He will not finish school. He will not begin his career. But these were side goals for Adam. His CHIEF goal was seeking the kingdom of God, and his righteousness. Rejoice in that for him. I thank God for Adam, and want to be more like him."

What do we often focus on when death comes? Isn't it often those side goals Scott mentioned? Unlike Scott, don't we often get bogged down in the unfinished? He won't finish school. He won't finish the project. He didn't even start his career or his own family. He won't finish whatever book he was reading at the time. He won't finish the Hobbit trilogy or the Hunger Games movies. He won't get to see kids or grandkids grow up. But do you know what he did finish? He did finish the race. In **II Timothy 4:7-8** Paul says in regard to his own impending death: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing" (ESV). And, of course, that is exactly the point Scott was making in his statement. For all the unfinished business, there was one finished business that mattered. He finished the race. I'd like us to consider that race for a few minutes. And I'd like for us to learn to be finishers like our brother Adam.

Discussion:

I. A moment that changes everything.

- A. A Christian was once talking to a high school student who was going places academically and materially but who seemed to be wasting his life spiritually. He began to ask the young man a series of questions. "So what are you going to do after high school?" "I don't know," the young man replied, "I guess I'll go to college." "Then what?" the Christian responded. "I'll get a job." "Then what?" "I hope I'll get married." "Then what?" "We'll have kids." "Then what?" "I guess I'll work hard, get promotions, and eventually retire." "Then what?" "I'll relax and enjoy all that I've accomplished, spending time with my grandkids." "Then what?" "Well, I mean, I guess at some point, I'll die." "Then what?" the Christian finished.
- B. And that is exactly the point. Then what? Death is a moment that changes everything. Can you picture that moment after death? Before that moment a host of things seem to matter. What kind of house do you live in? What kind of car do you drive? What kind of clothes do you wear? What job do you have? How much money are you making? How many people listen to you? Who knows you and who do you know? The list goes on and on of what matters the moment before you die. But what about that moment after you die?

- C. How many races are you running right now? The school race? The work race? The fame race? The money race? The political race? The rat race? The other races you are running are not necessarily wrong. But how are you prioritizing these pursuits? Are they distracting you from the one race that matters? Sadly, far too many people are putting off the one race that matters while they run all these other races. "Let me finish college, then I'll serve You God." "Let me get my financial freedom, then I'll serve You God." "God, I want to serve You, but right now I've got to pursue my career."
- D. We have time to do schoolwork, watch TV, play baseball and soccer, pursue the next client, run all kinds of races, but we often don't have time to be in God's Word, to pray, to teach someone the Gospel, to meditate on God, to disciple or be disciplined, to spend time with Christians. Let's face it, God's Word says if a person won't work, neither should he eat (**II Thessalonians 3:10**). Obviously, pursuits like education and career are part of our lives. The question is are we pursuing them in submission to our pursuit of God or in place of our pursuit of God?
- E. Before death, we can get all of these things blurred and mixed up. Death is the moment that changes everything clarifying. Trust me, no one ever got to the other side of death, came into the presence of God and said, "I just regret that I didn't make more money" or "I only wish I could have seen such and such movie" or "I wish I had spent more time trying to be popular." If you don't believe me, just consider the account of Lazarus and the rich man in **Luke 16:19-31**. So I ask again, what do you think will matter to you the moment after you die?

II. In pursuit of the prize.

- A. What are the rewards of all these races we run? If you win at the school race, you may receive titles and certificates. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be Valedictorian? You might get scholarships to further education or a pathway into a good job. If you win at the sports race, you might receive trophies or rings. You might be idolized by thousands, perhaps millions. You might get a financial contract that funnels millions of dollars your way. Wow! Wouldn't that be awesome? What if you win the fame and fortune race? Money. Titles. Television appearances. Mansions. Luxury cars. Luxury vacations. Can you just imagine how great that would be? It's easy to see why so many get caught up in these races or lament doing so poorly in them. The rewards are so provocative and so immediate. But then you die and then what? Jesus explained that laying up treasures on earth is ultimately pointless. Moth and rust will destroy these treasures, thieves may break in and steal (**Matthew 6:19-20**). The Preacher of Ecclesiastes explained how pointless toil in this world is no matter the victories and rewards. He said, "I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?" (**Ecclesiastes 2:18-19**, ESV).
- B. Think about some of the great "winners" throughout history. Alexander the Great conquered huge chunks of the known world by his early 30s. But he was a pagan. Where is he now? Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were patriots that helped lead the way to forging a new nation. Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. Franklin discovered electricity. Even today millions idolize them both. But they were deists who did not accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Where are they now? Thomas Edison was the fourth most prolific inventor in history, holding 1093 U.S. Patents. He developed things that changed technological history like the phonograph, the motion picture camera, and my personal favorite—the long-lasting, practical electric light bulb. But he too rejected the personal God and Jesus Christ. Where is he now? Albert Einstein is regarded by many as one of the smartest men who ever lived. In fact, he's kind of the colloquial standard of intelligence. His theory of relativity is one of the most well-known scientific theories and formulas (even if it is not understood by most of us). But his concept of God was essentially the sum total of the natural world and he rejected the intervention of God in history and therefore rejected Jesus. Where is he now? We might consider these men winners of great races. They received some of the greatest rewards these races can offer. But where are they now? And what good did their rewards do them?
- C. According to **II Timothy 4:8**, the race we long to finish leads to a crown of righteousness awarded by the righteous judge. No doubt, Paul is crafting a word picture of an ancient Olympic athlete winning his race and receiving a laurel crown. Those who finish God's race are like that Olympian. But they do not receive a perishable crown. They receive an imperishable one (cf. **I Corinthians 9:26**). In fact, the runners of this race have an imperishable inheritance reserved in heaven (**I Peter 1:3-5**). And that inheritance is not some heavenly equivalent to the worthless riches of earth. That inheritance is God Himself (cf. **Psalms 16:5-6**). Just stop and think, the finishers have God. They are no longer separated in any sense of the word. They have the fullness of God. They are fully in His presence complete with life, joy, and pleasures forevermore (**Psalms 16:11**). I want that more than any certificate, trophy, or annual salary. How about you?

III. Finish the race.

- A. In **Acts 20:24**, Paul had been warned by the Holy Spirit that imprisonment and afflictions awaited him if he went to Jerusalem. Brethren were encouraging him to stay away. But he says: “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course [race] and the ministry that I have received from the Lord Jesus...” (ESV). Then in **II Timothy 4:7** he says: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (ESV). That is what God is looking for—Finishers.
- B. But did you notice what Paul said? How did he finish the race? He did not account his own life as of any value or as precious to himself. As Jesus says, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (**Matthew 16:25**, ESV). As Paul explains, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...” (**Philippians 3:7-9a**, ESV).
- C. Paul explains that it takes work and discipline in **I Corinthians 9:26-27**—“So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (ESV). We won’t finish the race on accident. We must run with aim and purpose. And we must discipline ourselves. We must finish the race. Praise the Lord that God provides us victory through Jesus Christ (**I Corinthians 15:57**). Yet, we must aim and purpose to stand with Him, to run hand in hand with Him (**I Corinthians 15:58**).
- D. Finish the race. No matter what—finish the race. Satan will attack—finish the race. The world will laugh and mock—finish the race. Sacrifices will have to be made—finish the race. Others will drop out—finish the race. Sins will beset you—finish the race. Distractions will confront you—finish the race. Even other racers will sometimes ridicule you—finish the race. Others may get more recognition in this life—finish the race. You may lose some of the other races in life—finish THE race. Others have gone before you—finish the race. God is with you—finish the race.
- E. The Hebrew writer exhorts us: “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). Is something hindering you in the race? Lay it aside. Is some sin clinging closely to you? Cut it off. Is the blaring cacophony of Satan’s forces telling you to quit running so hard, to relax, to take a break? Run with endurance. Do you wonder if it is worth it? Remember Jesus who ran His race even through a cross and now has the joy of being exalted to the right hand of God. Listen to the voices of the faithful. They are cheering you on. “Finish! Finish! Finish! Finish the race!”
- F. Please, I’m begging you for the sake of God’s glory—do not let anything matter to you more than being a finisher.

Conclusion:

Of course, to be a finisher, you must also be a starter. Here’s the great thing about God’s race. There are no qualifying rounds. Don’t sit there wondering if you are good enough to run in this race. You aren’t. But God will be with you through Jesus Christ if you will simply surrender yourself to Him and enter His race. Saul/Paul began God’s race by being baptized to wash away his sins (**Acts 9:18; 22:16**). Have you started?