



New Years Eve – Running Your Race

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Today, we are going to be in 2 Timothy 4 in the first 8 verses. I encourage you to take this text with you into the new year as we talk about *Running Your Race*. You are responsible for your race, and you do have a race to run. I know this time of year, people are thinking about what their word for 2024 will be. I talked to several of you who are setting goals. Some of you are going to hit that gym hard on Tuesday. All that is good, but we're going in a little bit different direction today.

I've always been a student of US Presidential history. I love it. If it's a movie, a documentary, a book, I just devour this. One of my favorite traditions happens at the end of one president's term, leading into the new president.

I don't know if you know what happens on inauguration day... I should probably preface this by saying on a normal inauguration day. But a lot is going on at the white house while everybody is down at the capital. They're moving one family out and moving one family in. They are even redecorating the Oval Office.

A tradition that I've always loved, and I hope we get back to is on the last day in office, the outgoing president writes a letter to the incoming president. I've chosen to read to you today the letter from George H.W. Bush to Bill Clinton primarily because he has phenomenal handwriting. A lot of our presidents could have slowed down the penmanship a little bit because some of them are hard to read.

This is a handwritten note left in the oval office for President Bill Clinton.

January 20th, 1993.

Dear Bill,

When I walked into this office just now, I felt the same sense of wonder and respect that I felt four years ago. I know you will feel that too. I wish you great happiness here. I never felt the loneliness some presidents have described. There will be very tough times, made even more difficult by criticism you may not think is fair. I'm not very good at giving advice, but just don't let the critics discourage you or push you off course. You will be our president when you read this note. I wish you well. I wish your family well. Your success is now our country's success. I am rooting hard for you.

Good luck,
George

I love a letter like that. It's almost like last words. At the end of 2023, it is a good time for us to reflect. Today, we are in the climax of 2 Timothy 4, and you can consider these Paul's last words to Timothy. Where is he writing these words from? I need you to think of a cold, lonely, Roman jail cell under imminent threat of execution. He has run his race. He is at the end, and he sends back this encouragement, this exhortation, this challenge, this charge in a very powerful statement to Timothy.

4 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus. With God and Christ Jesus as my witness **...who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge:** (Listen to these words) **2 Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season...** Preaching and teaching is at the foundation of the church. The health of the church will go in the direction of the preaching and the teaching.

Some of you may have grown up in a church that was happy, happy, happy, encouraging all the time. Or maybe some of you grew up in a church that was rebuke, rebuke, rebuke and challenge, challenge, challenge and correct, correct, correct. Look at what he says. **...correct, rebuke and encourage...**

This is part of a preaching ministry. When you come in here week after week and hear the Bible read and then the Bible taught, the Bible preached, you should be aligning your life with the scripture, not the other way around. We don't come to the scripture with our lifestyle, looking for verses to support what we've already decided to do. We come to the scripture for correction, rebuke, encouragement. And he says, "As you fulfill this ministry, Timothy, you need to understand that it's **...with great patience and careful instruction.** Do you know what he's saying right there? He's saying "life-change is slow and for some people listening to you, Timothy, it will take years for them to get what you are trying to get across. And it will frustrate you. You will see someone who has been at your church for year and years living in a way... You know that is not what the scripture teaches them. And it will make you want to pounce." I have no idea what's he's talking about here, but I'm trying to express to you what he's sharing with him.

It's going to take great patience when you preach, teach, correct, rebuke, and encourage people. because sometimes it will take people years to get this. so, with patience and careful instruction, fulfill this ministry of preaching God's word and be ready at all times.

3 For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires... You could also read here the word Lifestyles. **...they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.** They won't want to hear what you are teaching. They won't want to hear what you're preaching. They will fight against you. **4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.** So, what do you do in that situation? The charge continues. **5 But you...** In that moment when you are frustrated, Timothy, in that moment where your patience has run out, in that moment where you're trying to help people in their lives, giving them God's truth.... He says this. **keep your head in all situations...** Don't shoot off. Patience, careful instruction. Keep your head in all situations. **...endure hardship...** This is not just poverty. This is all the hardship that comes with people hating you because of what you are proclaiming. You're going to have to endure a lot of hardships. But in the midst of all that, **...do the work of an evangelist...** Don't stop calling people to repentance. Don't stop calling people to change lives in Christ Jesus. **...discharge all the duties of your ministry.**

What a charge from a man who is soon to leave, as Phil Robertson calls it, Planet Earth. What a charge to the young man. And the challenge for us here today, for those who have been running their race a little while, is to think about those who are just getting started.

In 2005, Billy Graham retired. All that really meant was he wasn't doing the large crusades any more. I've heard the stories. I never got to meet Billy Graham, I never got to meet Bill Bright with Campus Crusades. I never got to meet any of these guys, but I heard the stories and I've seen the pictures. To their last day... I mean on oxygen in a hospital bed in their homes, they were still gathering young people in ministry around them to encourage them and challenge them. "Keep running. I'm one who has helped you and encouraged you. I'm soon to be leaving, but I need you to be running. I need you to be a faithful steward of God's truth."

This is one of my favorite pictures of Billy Graham because I long for this day right here. He's in a rocking chair, reading a book with his dog. Does it get any better than that? Yeah, it's part of his retirement, but that's... Listen, he did far more in his retirement. I know some of you have retired from a job. But if you are a follower of Jesus, until you cross the finish line, which means take your last breath or the Lord returns, you are still investing in those coming behind you. You are still giving a charge to this generation, whatever generation is behind you. Stay true to the word of God, being corrected, rebuked, and encouraged.

Billy Graham did that. I had that. I was able to be there four days before my mentor, Gary Smalley went to be with the Lord. I was able to go be at his bedside as he was on hospice. To their last breath, they were still encouraging people. I hope that's true of me. I hope that's true of every single person at Woodland Hills Family Church.

Billy Graham said this: *"Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. I shall be more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God."*

That leads us into the next two verses where Paul says to Timothy, after giving him this charge.

6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near... He isn't just speaking of his life. He's saying now, at the very end... They would pour wine on the altar or on the ground. He's saying that's what my life is right now. It's being completely poured out and I am ready to go be with the Lord.

And then these familiar words to many. **7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.** And I want to talk about that a little bit today. So, we've got these illustration of a fighter and a runner. What do boxers and runners have in common. I know some of you will go to Rocky when we mention fighting or boxing. But when I think of boxers and running, I think of training. Like long, hard hours, day after day. I think of pain. I think of endurance. They are exhausted, they are worn down, they are beat up. And they feel a lot like this kid right here, fighting the good fight.

There are some in this room right now and across this campus and watching online that are just starting their race. And there are some in this room and across this campus and a lot at 8:15 that are nearing

the finish line. They are coming to the end. Can I encourage you that are nearing the finish line? As you run your race, cheer on runners behind you. Don't make it just about finishing. Don't make it just about finishing with enough money. Don't make it about the conversation of just making sure you have enough to get that iron lung you might need one day. If that's your goal in finishing, you're missing it. Don't make just finishing your goal. As you near the finish line, cheer on those behind you.

When I think about our Marriage 911 ministry, you need to know in this church, we have dozens and dozens of mentors that work with couples in crisis. R.G. and Karen Yallaly have been married 58 years. They have earned a rocking chair and a dog and a front porch. They have nothing left to prove. If they were completely done in ministry, none of us would look at them and be like, "Slackers. Heading into your 80s doing nothing." They roll up their sleeves... R.G. is an elder in our church.

And then Grady and Sharon Reeves have been married 54 years. I've never been a big fan of the anniversary cards that say, "You made it. You got here. Congratulations on 50 years." There are people in here who have been married 50 years and it feels like... That's not the goal of life to just get there. These people are pouring into other people.

Ron and Anna Ozborn have been married 52 years. These are couples who put up with a lot of nonsense with the way they are treated. I hear stories. I'm not talking about the marriages themselves, I'm talking about the way people in crisis treat them. They understand that until they draw their last breath or the Lord returns, keep cheering on those behind you. It's not just about your marriage. It's not just about your race; it's about those who are running behind you. Finishing well means helping others run their race that are coming behind you, cheering them on.

I talked to somebody after the last gathering. They dropped out of the race. They're not fighting the good fight anymore. They aren't running their race because they were offended by someone. Listen, don't let another Christian keep you from running your race. Every single person in here can name a name and give that name as an excuse for quitting. You're not alone in that. You think you're alone in that? For some of us, our list could be really long. You are 100% responsible for your race. Never let another person knock you out of the race. Keep running. At the same time, a warning for me, a warning for you, don't give another Christian an excuse to stop running. Don't be that person. Walk alongside, care for, and encourage those who are running and fighting the good fight. Fighting the good fight, running the race, keeping the faith. You may hear that term "Keeping the faith" and think that means securing your salvation. That's not at all what Paul is talking about as he gives this charge to Timothy. What's he's speaking of when he says, "I have kept the faith," is faithful stewardship of Christian truth. Sticking with the doctrine that was given to you.

In Timothy's case, it was passed onto him from his mother and his grandmother. The ministry that he is now involved in came from the laying on of hands. He was surrounded by people encouraging him and cheering him on as he ran. We talk about that a lot in the church – know your spiritual gifts, know your passion, know your abilities, your personality, your experiences. Find out what your race is and what God has call you specifically to do and steward that. What we are seeing today in this text – 2 Timothy 4: 7 is a responsibility of every single one of us even when our race looks a little different and that is to steward truth, and to care for truth.

But instead of keeping the faith, today, there is a term going around that is simply this: “Deconstructing faith.” We’re going to do a whole message I think in May on this. It’s being discussed. The younger generation is talking about it more. I want to include the older generations so they can be involved, but this means a lot of different things. That’s why it’s a little difficult to talk about. It’s like the word “Woke.” It means different things to different people. Deconstructing faith means a lot of different things. For some people, saying they are deconstructing, they are not actually deconstructing, they are de converting. So, some would say this is the demolition of evangelical belief.

There are those who use this term and then want to burn the church to the ground. They’ve had a bad church experience. They were in a toxic environment or an abusive environment in this church or that ministry. They’ve taken this broad brush-stroke and now they are painting all church and all evangelical churches and all ministries this way. Some of them have actually labeled themselves not evangelicals, but exevangelicals. Do you know what deconstructing is? Just so we know. This I think is true for everybody. Amy takes me to fancy restaurants from time to time and I once had, in a restaurant... true story... I had a deconstructed pumpkin pie where the plate came, and it was all the pieces... I think it’s a lazy chef. That’s my opinion. He had all the ingredients there and he just put them on and go, “Let them make their own pie.”

What happens is all of us in our faith were handed pie and then we now are taking it and taking the pieces out of it and going, “Well, that isn’t really what the Bible teaches, that’s more of a tradition. That’s not what Jesus taught. That was really more what my pastor growing up taught.” And they begin deconstructing what was handed to them by leaders. Some are like, “Tear it all down.” Others are just rethinking one’s upbringing and faith tradition.

“I grew up with some pretty jacked up ideas. I’m rethinking those. I’m deconstructing from them.”

Some are deconstructing and they believe it’s the cleansing of the church. And yes, there are toxic, spiritually abusive churches that need to be cleansed. They’ve allowed the main thing to drift and now they find themselves hurting people rather than helping people.

I think for most people that I talk to that have left the church – some our church, but other churches. It’s just this disentangling themselves from maybe some things they see that they don’t think align with scripture. They don’t want to walk away from Jesus, but they are struggling with believers in the church. So, for many, it’s just aligning beliefs with scripture.

Some call this Critical Dismantling. It’s really the disentangling of what the Bible teaches, what we would call sound doctrine, it’s disentangling this from cultural, political, and even denominational ties. And all of us have probably done this to some degree. I know there are folks in our church who have done this just recently. They’ve come to our church from a church that they have been a part of for decades and that church didn’t have instruments for worship. They were taught that you don’t have instruments in the church. And then they come to Woodland Hills. I’ve had a conversation with them, and I’d be like, “I would think our church would be a bit jarring.” There are probably other gateway churches to get a start like, “Just go to a piano church. Let’s start there. And work your way toward Woodland Hills.

Some of you are doing that and you're like, "I'm looking in the scripture where we are not allowed to have instruments, so you're disentangling from what you grew up with and you're trying to align what you believe with the scripture. I started doing this years ago. I actually wrote a book called *Young and in Love* for this purpose because I was just fed up with purity culture. Again, the Bible teaches us men and women to live pure lives, so I'm for purity. But the church started adding all sorts of weirdness and we now call that purity culture. I started moving away from it because I thought... *I don't think it's appropriate in a church for a young adult leader or a 20-year-old leader in our church to be talking to a 12-year-old about porn to the degree where it's explicit, where it becomes a culture for grooming.* That's not healthy. It's toxic. I think sometimes we don't see how purity culture was that foundation.

Whether it's the church or the schools, I'll be the one that talks to my kids about gender and identity and the sexually explicit stuff. Let me be the one that leads that. Now, for those that just clapped, I'm kind of curious if you've ever linked the way the church has talked about it with the way the school has talked about it. I hear some people saying, "I don't want the school to do this and this." I'm like the church has been doing that in a really weird way for decades and it's inappropriate. So many have deconstructed from purity culture.

I heard one contributor at the gospel coalition say it this way. *"As Christians, the process of evaluating our beliefs, tradition, and church culture in light of scripture and rejecting any unbiblical beliefs with the goal of living more authentically as Christians."* This should be a daily reality. And I like what she says. This isn't deconstruction. This is daily aligning our lives with the scripture, being corrected, rebuked and encouraged from the scripture.

So, deconstruction, for any of you who may be in this process now, is destructive. You're not deconstructing, you're de converting if it leads you to deny the authority of scripture, to abandon faith and begin mocking and judging other believers. This is not the way of Christ. And if just reading Bible passages with no interpretation, just reading them makes you mad, this is where you need to check your heart. This is where you need to ask, *Why am I so mad when I read the scripture?* It's because you're on a destructive path, not on a healthy path. Deconstruction with reconstruction and understanding... And it's hard because some of you have denominational preferences and non-essentials so ingrained in you that to remove them after 30, 40, 50 years of them being preached to you is very difficult. Can I just encourage all of us? Wherever you are in your faith journey right now, in your walk with Jesus, keep the faith. Be a faithful steward of truth because watch Verse 8.

8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day...For being a faithful steward of Christian truth. "But not just me, Timothy." —and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. There is a crown for each one that is a faithful steward of truth.

Years ago, I met with a pastor and an older gentleman. I submit myself to the authority of older, wiser men all the time. In our church and outside of our church. It just kind of came up. He goes, "Do you have a hit-by-the-bus plan?" I don't know if you know this, but most pastors are going to die by way of a bus. I go, "I don't." He said, "I need you to write it down and on the envelop write, "My hit-by-the-bus plan." I thought that was a little awkward. He says, "I want you to write down everything you want to see happen at Woodland Hills, everything you want to see happen in your family.

I want you to just write it down and seal it and make sure key people in your life know where it is so that if something happens to you today..."

Well, the good news is we are an elder led church, we have a teaching team... That plan is already in place. Again, It doesn't hinge on one guy at Woodland Hills Family Church. So, mine's a little bit different. I call it last words.

I want to encourage you. As you think about 2023... Some of you have been stressing over a word. I want to encourage you. Maybe you need more than one word. Maybe a lot of words. Maybe a couple of pages. But I want to encourage you to write a letter to your family. You know we are a family church and at this church, we put so much into children, we put so much into students, we put so much into young adults. And when you see the young adults walking into this church, I want you to start thinking about their leadership. As we near the finish line, it's not just about getting to the finish line, it's about cheering them on. Keep running, sound doctrine. Be ready in season and out of season. Preach, write it down.

Some of you, maybe you've never done this. Write a letter to your kids. I heard from many after the last gathering. They said, "I have so many kids, Ted, and grandkids not walking with the Lord." Write them a letter. Don't wait. Don't make it your last words. Encourage them. Don't be George Costanza's dad at Festivus. Don't make that the tone of your letter. Encourage them. Give them a charge.

I'm prepared for it. Once, Billy Graham was asked, "Mr. Graham, how would you like to be remembered?" And these are some of his last words. *"I hope I'll be remembered as someone who was faithful. Faithful to God, faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and faithful to the calling God gave me, not only as an evangelist, but as a husband, a father, and a friend. I am sure I have failed in many ways, but I take comfort in Christ's promise of forgiveness. And I take comfort also in God's ability to take even our most imperfect efforts and use them for his glory."* By the time you read this, I will be in heaven and as I write this, I'm looking forward with great anticipation to the day when I will be in God's presence forever."

And all God's people said... Amen.

Father, as we look at the heavy and challenging words, the last words of Paul to Timothy, may this be true of each one of us. May we not be those that are seeking itching ears, may we be faithful stewards of the truth. May we hold fast to what we've been given, what's been passed onto us from Grandma and from Mom, from church leaders that have laid hands on us.

For the church hurt, the toxicity, the abuse, all of this that comes against people, I pray that it will not take them out of the race, that they will keep running, fighting the good fight, not using other people or other Christians as excuses, but they will run the race. And that they, in their last days, as they near the finish line, will continue to pass on and they will cheer on those behind them. Give us these eyes and these ears moving into 2024, looking for the young people behind us that need encouragement, that need challenge, that need this charge. May we do this with great patience and careful instruction.

For the one who has never placed faith in Jesus that today would be the day of their salvation. That they would repent of their sins, confess with their mouth Jesus is Lord, believe their heart that he has been raised from the dead that they would be saved. Thank you for all that you've done in 2023 at Woodland Hills. we are grateful. As we look back over this morning's video, at what you've done, we praise you for what you've done.

And it's in the name of Jesus that we pray it and everyone agreed and said... Amen