

Finishing Strong

According to Steve Farrar in his book *Finishing Strong*, there were 3 up and coming Evangelists in 1945, all in their mid 20's who were causing quite a stir. Everywhere they spoke auditoriums were packed to capacity with thousands of eager listeners.

First there was Chuck Templeton who many proclaimed as the next Babe Ruth of Evangelism. Then there was Bron Clifford, who many believed to be the most gifted of the 3 preachers. Clifford packed out the chapel at Baylor University in Texas one day. For nearly 2 and a half hours the students sat on the edge of their seats as Clifford preached Jesus Christ.

Billy Graham was the 3rd young man who burst onto the scene that same year, speaking to as many as 30,000 people a night. Most of us know about Mr. Graham because for over 70 years he faithfully lived and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Millions heard and thousands responded in faith to Christ through his ministry. But why is it that you have never heard of Clifford or Templeton? What happened to them?

Well, just 5 years later, by 1950, Chuck Templeton had left the ministry to pursue a career in radio and television. Worse yet, he no longer considered himself a follower of Christ and completely turned his back on the Faith. What about Bron Clifford? By 1954, 9 years later, alcohol and financial irresponsibility had ruined his life. He left his wife, he abandoned his 2 sons, and at the age of 35 he died all alone in a cheap motel in Texas from cirrhosis of the liver. How sad! But that is not all!

According to Steve Farrar in the same book, less than 10% of all followers of Christ finish well. He explains that many end up caving into worldly passions and sinful desires, or get distracted by spiritual lukewarmness, or become derailed by various false teachings, or worse yet, they deny the faith altogether. What a travesty! What's even more tragic is all of us know someone like that: perhaps it is a close family member, a dear friend, a work associate, or a neighbor.

If you are a follower of Jesus, here is the truth: you and I must be on guard, because none of us are beyond temptation. You see, the enemy of our soul wants to distract us, discourage us, depress us, derail us, even destroy us. That is why the apostle Paul warns us in I Corinthians 10:12, ***"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"*** And in Mathew 24:9-11 Jesus proclaimed, ***"At that time (the last days) many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."*** (See also Colossians 1:21-23 and 2:6-7.)

You see, in the Christian life, it is not how you start that matters; it is how you finish. This is precisely what I want to talk about today. MT: How can you and I stand firm in the faith and Finish Strong in a world that is dominated by spiritual darkness, that is filled with doctrines of demons, and continues to embrace and promote all sorts of ungodly, immoral and sinful lifestyles?

Paul answers this million dollar question in Colossians 3: 1-14. The book of Colossians was written to a group of Jesus followers in the city of Colossae who were being bombarded by the same issues we face today in our culture. Paul gave them 4 gold nugget truths--4 daily choices--that enabled them to stand firm in the faith and to finish strong. They are just as real and relevant today.

1. **We must Know Who We Are. We must Embrace Our New Identity.** Chpt. 1-3

The first gold nugget of truth is to remember and embrace who we are! This is precisely where Paul starts this letter.

Look at 1:13 "For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Look at 2:13 "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all your sins..."

Look at 3:3 "For you died..."

Look at 3:1 "...you have been raised with Christ..."

Look at 3:3 "...your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

God's Word informs us that the moment we turn to God and place our faith in Jesus Christ, at that moment we have a new position, a new identity. We are in Christ, and He is in us. Our union with Him is so close and intimate that everything He experienced we also experience. He died, we also died to sin. He was buried, our old life was buried. He rose again, we also were raised again to a new life (Christ in us). He ascended to Heaven, our life is now hidden there with Christ. Elsewhere in Philippians 3:20 God's Word declares that "**Our citizenship is in Heaven.**" That means that even though you and I reside on planet earth for the time being, our real home is the Eternal Kingdom of God. We don't really belong here, we are just passing through. When you and I come to grips with who we really are in Christ (our new identity), it will radically transform us from the inside out! It will change our thoughts, our desires, our dreams and our actions.

Example: Something similar happened to the 19th century Queen Victoria. When she was a little girl, she was quite naughty. She left her daily chores undone, she did not take her studies serious, and she often threw temper tantrums when she didn't get her way. It became so serious that the Royal family decided it was time to inform her who she was. You see, they had kept her position and privilege a secret. So they instructed her tutor to actually write Victoria's name in her History book as the next Queen of England. One day as she was reading her history book, she came upon this list of Queens. When she came to the last name on the list, she realized it was hers.

At that moment a light went on in her mind. For the first time she realized her true identity. She exclaimed to her tutor, "Do you mean I am to be the next Queen of the entire Kingdom?" To which her tutor answered, "Yes, because you have been born into the Royal Family, you are the future Queen of England." For a moment she sat in stunned silence. Then she uttered the following words. "**Well, if that is true, then I had better start acting like a Queen, hadn't I?**" History records from that point on that she became a changed young girl; and became one of the most beloved Queens in English history.

If we are going to possess a persevering faith and a vibrant growing love for Jesus in this spiritually dark world, then we must keep on remembering our new identity (who we are in Christ). We must embrace the reality that our old life is dead and gone, we have a new life in Christ, we are citizens of God's eternal Kingdom, we are sons & daughters of the King of Kings.

2. We Must set our Hearts and Minds on Things Above. Verses 1-2

The second Gold Nugget of truth we must choose to obey is found in verses 1-2. We must set our hearts and minds on things above. What actually does that mean? In the Bible the word "heart" refers to our affections, our dreams, or what we truly love and treasure. The Word "mind" in the Bible stands for our understanding, or what we think about. So Paul's appeal to us is to intentionally keep on setting our affections and our thoughts on Christ, His 2nd coming, and all the privileges and eternal riches that are at our disposal because we are citizens of His Eternal Kingdom. We are to take our affections and our minds off of the temporary circumstances, events, problems and pleasures of this world and focus them on Christ.

John MacArthur said this in his study Bible. "The believers whole position should orient itself toward heaven, just as a compass needle orients itself toward the north. To think heavenly thoughts is to be preoccupied with the One who reigns there and to view the events of this world through His eyes and with an eternal perspective."

Do you and I always do that? Not really. Too often, we focus on our temporary circumstances; or the next tragic event in our world; or our hobbies; or our material possessions; or our problems and our pain. We have it backwards and that is precisely why God placed this in His revealed Word. He knows we constantly need to be reminded to "Set our affections on Him and our eternal home. To keep our minds anchored on the Eternal Truth! To Keep looking Up!"

Example: When I think of how often my focus strays off of Christ and His Eternal Kingdom, I am reminded of my son Jon while he was in high school track. Jon was a high jumper. He was consistently jumping 6 to 6'1". But then he went through a time when he could no longer clear 6'; and he was frustrated! Finally, one day one of the coaches took him aside and simply asked him, "Jon, when you are approaching the bar, where are you looking, what are you focusing on?" Jon responded, "Why, I am looking at the bar, of course." The coach got wide eyed and excited, and exclaimed, "That's your problem, Jon! You have to look higher. Take your eyes off of the bar and look 6 inches above the bar." Jon tried it and guess what?! He was able to jump between 6'3" and 6'5" the rest of the year.

We have the same problem. Our focus is too low. We get discouraged because we focus on our temporary circumstances and tribulations, or get side tracked because we are running after worldly treasures and pleasures of this world. God says, "Look up. Take your eyes off of this world and set them on me. Since you died to your old life and since you have been given a new life in Christ and since you are a citizen of heaven then keep on setting your affections on Me and your thoughts on things that are eternal. Keep looking forward to the day you will be with Me forever."

Scripture: Do you know what, even Jesus had to do that. Listen to Hebrews 12:2. *"...Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author*

and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” How was Jesus able to face the horrible death on the cross and to actually fulfill the Father’s plan? He had to look beyond the cross, the suffering, the mocking, the painful death and He had to see the Joy that awaited Him on the other side. We must do the same: we must look beyond our cross (trials, world, problems) and see the joy of being with the Father, Son & Holy Spirit in His Eternal Kingdom.

3. We Must Put to Death the Sin of our old life. 3:5-10

This 3rd gold nugget of truth is not always considered a gold nugget. In fact, many churches and believers often down-play it or ignore it altogether. But it is one we must choose to obey if we are going to run the race of faith well and grow in our love for Jesus in a world filled with darkness. What is it? We must put to death the sins of our old life. We must keep on confessing our sin and turning away from all of our sin. Paul writes in Colossians 3:5 ***“Put to death therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these the wrath of God is coming....”***

I am saddened about what is going on in so called “Christian circles” these days. So many preachers and denominations are telling us that as long as you believe in Jesus it doesn’t matter how you live your life. You can love Jesus and live together without getting married, you can marry someone of the same gender, you can determine your own gender, you can view pornography on your phone or computer, you can listen to songs and watch movies with immoral messages, and the list goes on. That is not what God’s word says. The Beck Translation in verses 5 here says ***“Kill then what is earthly in you...”*** “Kill sexual immorality, kill impurity, kill lust, kill evil desires, kill greed.” Why should we kill these things? Because these behaviors are nothing less than idol worship. And here’s the truth: if you and I do not kill our sin it will kill us. That is our enemies goal!

Scripture: ***“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith...”*** 1 Peter 5:8.

Example: Years ago I read a story about a woman who had a pet python. She had a rather peculiar relationship with this snake. Oftentimes she would come home from work and place the snake around her shoulders and it would harmlessly slither around her body at will. There seemed to be this mutual respect and trust between the two of them. She did this for months. But one day something horrible happened. The pet snake wrapped itself around the woman and began to constrict it’s body until the woman could no longer breathe. The python did what comes naturally for a python: it kills and destroys. And that is the nature of worldly passions and fleshly desires. If we do not kill our sin, it will kill us. If we coddle, compromise with, or try and coexist with our sin, it will strangle the spiritual life right out of us; it will destroy our joy, our walk with Jesus, and before long we are left with a shipwrecked faith. Maybe you can honestly say, Randy, I do not have a problem with any of those sins anymore. Hallelujah! Glory to God!

But notice, Paul doesn’t end with this list. He continues in verse 8, ***“But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its***

practices...” The truth is that for the believer who wants to finish strong, repentance is an ongoing life style.

4. We Must Keep Pursuing Christ and His Righteousness in our Lives. 3:12-14

The 4th and final gold nugget truth we need to obey is to Keep on Pursuing Christ and His righteousness in every area of our lives. Since we have been given a new life in Christ, and His Spirit and life dwells within us, not only are we to put to death our old sinful habits and tendencies, but we are to replace them with His character, his purity, his love, his kindness. Some people say that God loves us just the way we are--sins and all. That is true, but it is also true that He loves us too much to let us stay that way. His desire is for us to pursue the character and purity of Christ.

Scripture: God’s Word clearly affirms this truth in Ephesians 1:4 where we read, ***“Even before He made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in His eyes.”*** (NLT).

Example: Let me illustrate it this way. In the summer time two of my favorite activities is to work in the garden and in the yard. Oftentimes I get so into my work that when I come in for dinner my clothes is dripping wet with sweat and covered with dirt and grass stains. Like a good house wife, Mary sends me to the shower before I can sit down to the dinner table. After all that filth and fowl air is washed away, I don’t slip my old clothes back on do I? Absolutely not. It is the same for the follower of Jesus. After you and I have been forgiven and washed in the blood of Jesus, we must not slip on the same old sinful habits, thoughts and actions again. No, we need to replace those old sinful patterns with the purity and character of Christ.

He came to this earth 2000 years ago not only to love us and forgive our sins, but to set us free from those sins so that we can clothe ourselves with his purity, his love, kindness, forgiveness, compassion and humility. So that people will see Jesus in us and want Him in their lives also.

We started asking ourselves how can we keep walking with Jesus and finish strong in our faith in such a spiritually dark and immoral world? Paul gives us these 4 gold nugget truths, that if we continue to obey, will enable us to do just that. We must choose to: remember and embrace who I am in Christ; I must choose to set my heart and mind on Jesus and His eternal Kingdom; I must put to death the old sinful habits of the old life; and I must keep on pursuing Christ and His character. I close with a wonderful promise given to us in 2 Peter 1:10-11. After discussing some of these same truths, Peter closes his paragraph with this promise. ***“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”***