

## End Strong

Acts 28:14b-15, 28:30-31

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The title of this sermon, End Strong, is not a call to keep working till the day you drop. It's a call to keep receiving the creative work of God, right to the end, when he brings it to completion. \*\*\* Eventually everything comes to an end. Jobs come to an end. School comes to an end -- although no student ever thinks that. Relationships come to an end and so do all marriages (either by divorce or death). Now parenting, as I am discovering, doesn't ever really come to an end, but your childhood certainly comes to an end, all too quickly. And in time, this mortal life will also end.

The ending of any story is perhaps its most important part. It is at the end that the tensions of the story get resolved and the moral of the story is made clear. There is nothing worse than reading a novel that doesn't end well. Or, watching a movie that just putters out. Or, listening to someone talk who doesn't know how to make the point like a plane that just keeps circling and circling over Dulles!

Each chapter of a story also has an ending, whether it is the completion of a job or the ending of a particular relationship. There is a chapter about leaving home or moving from one city to the next. The way that you end a chapter of your life will also provide the moral to that story. And the way that you end any one chapter will dramatically effect your experience in the next chapter. In the end, the way you choose to use your final years of life will certainly be what we are talking about at your funeral. So by all means, you want to make sure that you have a strong ending.

Today, after a year of sermons, we have come to the end of Luke's early church history in the book of Acts. As far as we know it, we have heard what are apparently the last words written on Paul's life. What can we learn from the ending of Paul's life that will guide us in our own efforts as we bring to completion the various chapters of our own life hopefully with a strong ending? That the rest of our life might be affirmed. What does the text tell us about how to do this?

The first thing our text tells us is that Paul does not end his life alone. Even as he was walking up the Appian Way from the seaport towards Rome, a community of believers came to him. "On seeing them," we are told, "Paul thanked God and took courage." How many times during this series of sermons on the book of Acts have we noticed this common theme: Paul was not a lone ranger. Not only did he always have traveling companions, but everywhere he went he made sure that he participated in the life of the spiritual community of Jesus Christ. It is not always easy to be in this community. We have seen a lot of conflict along the way, and a great deal of this conflict was with the church. But Paul took this community seriously, seriously enough to honor the conflicts and not walk away. Not even the apostle Paul could understand himself apart from those around him.

So, if you are thinking about making a move to end one chapter and begin another, you have to submit to the authority of the body of Christ around you, asking them if this is the will of Christ. It does not mean that you will agree with them, but you have to take the opinions of the body of Christ seriously. It is the only way that you can know the will of Christ. None of us are in this alone.

If you are thinking about retiring and moving away from your community, from the people who have known you and shaped your life for years and years, to some little place that sure looks like paradise in the brochures, you first need to ask, how will I participate with a circle of believers in the place I am going? I am not saying that you cannot retire and move away, what I am saying is that you can't move to a place . . . you can only move to a people, a family, specifically, the family Jesus Christ.

I've done too many funerals for old widows who died lonely in distant paradise. And when you are lonely, it is never paradise. You need the body of Christ if you are going to end strong.

Now, perhaps you are thinking that dying is a long way off for you. And, you may even be right about that. Maybe you are only at the halfway mark through the story of life. Then this is the time to make some critical decisions about how you will play the rest of the game. Have you ever watched a football game where the team comes out of halftime completely invigorated? You think, what got into these guys? Did somebody say something to them in the locker room? When you are at halftime, it is a good time to have a conversation with the coach. Do you really want to keep playing the game the way you have been?

In his wonderful book entitled "Half Time," Bob Buford distinguishes between those who strive for success and those who strive for significance. If you've spent the first half of life striving for success, then your agenda has been to accumulate as much wealth, power, or security as you can from the community. Now is the time to start to become a good steward of that success; use it to change the agenda of your life by striving to do something significant for the community.

Do not waste the second half of your life trying to collect more assets because you are going to have to leave them all behind anyway. Choose instead to leave behind a legacy. Choose to make a change in the quality of life for others. Choose to commit yourself to missions work, a ministry, or mentoring someone. Or commit to a dream that will out live you. "Everything worth doing," Augustine said, "cannot be accomplished in our own lifetime." Commit yourself to a great dream.

Secondly, in order to end strong, the text tells us that Paul ended his life "proclaiming the kingdom of God." To understand the full power of the ending to Luke's story, we have to remember that the story of Acts began with the disciples asking Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" (1:6). The last verse of the story then ends with us hearing that Paul was proclaiming the kingdom. However, it was not exactly the kingdom the early disciples were expecting. As we read through this story, it becomes clear that in God's kingdom, there was room for not only Israel, but also for the Gentiles. That is what happens when we commit ourselves to God's dreams. They are much bigger than we anticipate. God's dreams have a lot of surprises in them.

During the last two years of his life, Paul was under house arrest and chained to a Roman guard. He would talk to everyone who came to him about the kingdom of God, both Jews and Gentiles alike. I have often wondered about this guard who is chained to Paul. Imagine being this poor guy? For two years he has heard a lot of preaching. This guard doesn't have a chance. Paul was going to talk to anybody that he could.

In the end of the story, the gospel of the all-inclusive kingdom of God was being proclaimed to everyone. Do you see how the end of the story interprets the rest of the story? It starts with a question, when will the kingdom come? And with a promise the kingdom will come, Jesus says, you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. At the end of the story, Paul is in Rome fulfilling the early promise of the story.

Now what about you? Are you going to use the end of your life to fulfill the promise of your early life?

Every time I baptize a baby, I take a moment and look into the adoring eyes of the parents. I know what they are thinking. It is what we all think; there is so much promise in this child. Every child enters life with a clean slate, nothing but promise and possibility. We all get that in the beginning. But what about at the end of life? At the end of your life, will we be saying that you fulfilled the baptismal vows? That you grew into the faith, surrendered your life to Jesus Christ, and were consumed by the dreams of God to the end?

The third point this text teaches about ending strong is found in Luke's last words at the conclusion of Acts. The text says that Paul is teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. What an amazing ending to the story. Especially when we remember that Paul has spent the past four and a half years of his life in prison. And, along the way he had been shipwrecked, snake bitten, betrayed, and even attacked by mobs. All of this after years and years of having rocks at thrown at him. And yet, what are the final words on his life? "Nothing could hinder him from completing his mission."

If you have a mission that is a great mission in your life, do not be surprised if there are some obstacles in the way. In fact, you had better choose a mission that is worthy of obstacles. But if it is a mission of Jesus Christ, not even the gates of hell can prevail against it.

Are you struggling with declining health? Cancer or heart disease? These cannot hinder you from ending strong. Do you have a broken heart? Do you come from a broken family? Are you lonely? These won't hinder you from ending strong. Maybe you have made some big mistakes in your life? Committed a sin that has filled your heart with guilt? Wasted a lot of time? Not even these will hinder you from ending strong.

Maybe you are confused about what God's will is for you? Well, Paul was frequently confused. But, that did not prevent him from ending strong. God will get you where he wants you. The only thing that can prevent you from ending strong is your fear.

It is fear that focuses us more on the hindrances and obstacles of life than on the Savior Jesus Christ. Fear paralyzes us and prevents us from taking risk. There is no way you will ever end strong without taking huge risks along the way.

We would think that someone as focused and goal-oriented as the Apostle Paul would have gone crazy spending four and a half years of his life imprisoned. But it was during this time that he wrote his epistles to the Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians, each written with his most tender words. These letters are not angry, anxious, defensive, or any cousin of that terrible emotion fear.

Paul spends all his words in these letters writing: "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord" (Phil 3:8); "In him, we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing" (Eph 1:3); "In him, all things hold together" (Col 1:17); and, "he who hath begun a good work in you will bring it to completion" (Phil 1:6).

Why is Paul fearless? Why is he able to end his life strong enough to overcome every hindrance? Because he knows his life was never about what he got accomplished. Life is always about the good work that Jesus is doing in you, through you, for those around you, to the very end.

Good Shepherd, bring us all to the end of the story of fear, that we may use every fleeting day as an expression of thanksgiving for your salvation, which will continue to unfold right to the end. Amen.