

Between the Starting Pistol and the Checkered Flag

by Fred Tomlinson

This sermon focuses on the importance of staying true to the Gospel message amidst challenges and distractions, using the Apostle Paul's life as an example. It emphasizes the need for personal surrender to God, avoiding the secularization of the message, and maintaining a genuine, Spirit-led ministry. The speaker shares personal insights on humility, reliance on the Holy Spirit, and the call to preach only what God makes real in one's life.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:1, Acts 9:17, John 15:16, Galatians 1:15, Philippians 3:7, Romans 8:9, 1 Corinthians 6:12, 2 Timothy 4:6

Topics: "Faithfulness to the Gospel", "Surrender to God's Will"

Description

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Transcript

Well, my name is Fred Tomlinson, and today I would like to ask you to turn with me in scripture to the second book of Paul to Timothy, and in Chapter 1. And I'm reading just the opening couple of verses today. Paul writing says, he's an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus. To Timothy, my dearly beloved son, grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I thank God whom I serve from my forefathers with a pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day. Amen. I'll stop reading there, it might seem like an inappropriate place to stop, but I want to move through some different things that the Lord has been laying on my heart and drop down on perhaps one or two of the scriptures in this epistle, and maybe elsewhere as well.

But I'm thinking of what the Lord put on my heart to share last week when we were thinking about the great conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and if you've not listened to that message I encourage you to listen to it, I entitled it Grace Experienced. And Saul of Tarsus was the great persecutor of the church as we know

so well, and yet he became the church's greatest promoter. Such is the redeeming grace of our Saviour.

And I remember him going to the home of Ananias, you remember that he was commissioned to do that by Jesus himself, having met him on the road to Damascus, and just a verse from Acts chapter 9, and I'm reading it from a different translation than my usual one, but Ananias has now come to the house where Saul of Tarsus is currently resident, he's just arrived there. Ananias comes in having been commissioned by God so to do, and I read in the 17th verse of chapter 9, Ananias departed and entered the house and after laying his hands on him he said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Wonderful, and I try to imagine things as I'm reading in scripture, if you like it's reading between the lines, I'm trying to imagine how things are working out.

I can't help but say that when I think of Saul of Tarsus being now in the presence of this Son of God, Ananias, in the light of all that has been his past, we talked about that last week, and all he'd been doing to the church and to Christian men and women, and Jesus said, inasmuch as you did it to them you were doing it to me. How unthinkable all that is, and then to find himself here where this Christian brother reaches out to him and calls him Brother Saul, and I'm imagining that there was an embrace that took place at that point in time. There's the prayer, there's the response, and I can't help but imagine Saul of Tarsus as he was still named then, and excuse me if you think I'm exaggerating something, but in my mind I see him sobbing, I see him breaking his heart as the truth and reality of what he's been doing has dawned upon his heart, and that in the light of the living, resurrected, ascended Lord Jesus Christ speaking to him personally and directly.

How amazing is all of that, as he surely remembers just his own blindness. Now I'm not sure at all that he was in a kind of a mood, can I say, to sing, but as I think along those lines, I think of, you know you're hearing a lot about Charles Wesley here, and that's going to continue, but I think of something Charles Wesley once wrote, and in my mind I thought to myself, if it had been possible for Saul of Tarsus to be familiar with these words, I can see him in my mind, in some corner, breaking his heart before the Lord, in the light of such amazing grace extended to him, and Charles Wesley once wrote, On this glad day the glorious sun of righteousness arose, and my benighted soul he shone and filled it with repose. Sudden expired the legal strife, 't'was then I ceased to grieve, my second real and living life I then began to live.

Then with my heart I first believed, believed with faith divine, power with the Holy Ghost received to call the Saviour mine. I felt my Lord's atoning blood close to my soul applied. Me, me he loved, the Son of God, for me, for me he died.

I found and owned his promise true, ascertained for my part, my pardon passed in heaven I knew when written on my heart. Over a thousand tongues to sing my dear Redeemer's praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace, my gracious Master and my God, assist me to proclaim, to spread through all the earth abroad the honours of thy name. Amen.

How wonderful, how wonderful, I love those words there, my second real and living life I then began to live. He was born again, he was a new creation in Christ and his new real living life began to be. Hallelujah.

Wonderful. Now that was the beginning and beginnings are tremendously important and frankly, although it would be a different subject to what's on my heart, I sense and I believe that for very many professing Christians it's at that very stage where they go wrong, where they don't begin properly and as the result of

that nothing really fits together, nothing really works. But the kind of beginning that God, the Holy Spirit is able to bring into the lives of men and women is indescribable and there are no words that are adequate to speak of it.

But having established that beginning, that real commencement of the new life, there's another challenge, a very real challenge indeed and that is just how a person proceeds from that point. You know very well that in a race, it's really all about what takes place in between the explosion of the starting pistol and the chequered flag. The real race is what happens between those two points and it's very true to say to finish strong, you must run strong.

Now it would take many sessions here to try to include the many, many things that the texts of Scripture bring to us concerning this man Saul of Tarsus who is now the Apostle Paul. Many scriptures speak about his strong running, the boldness of his faith in Jesus, the confidence concerning the message he has to preach which I'll talk more about in a moment. But Paul was a man who was running strong right from the start, right from the beginning and there's no holding back at all from the very moment of that transformational experience on the Damascus Road and then with what accompanied that in that house when he's together with Ananias.

Paul knew that he was a special man, he knew it had been stated by God, he knew that he had been chosen by Almighty God for a purpose. Now let's not get tied up with with Arminianism and Calvinism, we're not going down that road, we just want to read what the Bible text says and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us through the words of Scripture. You know, I don't know whether it's ever really dawned on your own heart as you would say that well you have experienced this kind of supernatural beginning by the grace and power of God but has it ever really dawned upon you that God has chosen you and the text says it was Jesus himself in John 15, he said you have not chosen me.

We don't choose to give our lives to Christ, according to Jesus. He said I have chosen you and you know only to sit and think of this fact is such a wonderful indescribable experience that God has chosen me and I want you to sense the Holy Spirit speaking that freshly into your heart today. He's chosen you and Paul knew that if you like within the context of that choosing God had a purpose for his life.

I don't think it's put more clearly and wonderfully than in the epistle of Galatians that he wrote where he just says but when it pleased God who separated me from my mother's womb and called me by his grace to reveal his son in me and I might preach him among the heathen immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood and neither did I go to Jerusalem and so on as that reads in scripture but he knew beyond any doubt that God had called him and God had a purpose for his life and that was to exalt and glorify the Lord Jesus Christ and proclaim the great truth or truths that are all gathered in the ultimate truth of the redemptive work of Christ. Amen and Paul knew in his heart beyond any doubt that this was true. It's actually Charles Wesley again I've got the hymn book right in front of me but for those who've got the book I've got which is called Hymns of Eternal Truth the very first hymn that we used to always refer to as the birthday hymn because apparently he wrote it either for his own birthday I'm sure Bob Jones will clarify this for me it was either for his own birthday or his wife's birthday I'm not able to remember which but in that hymn in the 10th verse he says um um he's just speaking about his life he says I rejoice that I ever was born that's a starting point in the context of sensing God's call upon his life and the commissioning of God to him he rejoiced that he ever was born he said and then he says oh the goodness of God employing applaud his tribute of glory to raise his standard to bear and with triumph declare the unsearchable riches of God oh the fathomless love that is deigned to approve and prosper the work of my hands with my

pastoral crook I went over the brook and behold I am spread into bands amen finally I'm reading the 11th verse in which he says in a rapture of joy my life I employ the God of my life to proclaim tis worth living for this to administer bliss and salvation in Jesus's name my remnant of days I spend in his praise who died the whole world to redeem be they many or few my days are his due and they all are devoted to him amen amen I think that was those words would fit very nicely into the mouth of the great apostle as well because they're sharing they're you know so different so separated in time so separated in distance but the same great passion and sense of God's amazing grace for them amen and so Paul knew right from the beginning then that God had commissioned him and that he Paul was carrying a body of truth a body of truth which was entrusted to him he would write again to the Galatians and say concerning this truth that he didn't learn it it was not something he learned if I put it into a modern context it would be to say well he didn't hear someone sharing these things on YouTube or anything like that he didn't hear someone else saying it and he didn't make it he said I received it it came by revelation God sovereignly and divinely imparted to the understanding of this chosen vessel a whole body of truth for him to teach and minister to the the churches that were there around him at that time or coming into existence through his ministry what we know of course today is that that body of truth has continued to be available to men and women through the centuries through the millennia and here we are talking about it and thinking about it as we're together just now but he he received this body of truth which he himself referred to as the gospel of God it's wonderful he used different phrases to speak of the gospel that was from Romans chapter 1 where he speaks about the gospel of God elsewhere he speaks about the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ on yet another occasion he speaks about it as his own gospel he said according to my gospel and he knew where it came from he knew who the gospel belonged to who'd conceived it and was making it available to men and women but it had become so much a part of him his inner man had so embraced it and with the revelation God illuminated to him it was what he preached it was his gospel amen and he he spent his life from that Damascus road experience preaching that message of the gospel he preached it and he taught it and we find him defending it but supremely he lived it and that of course is that that's the foundation of everything he was living what he preached there was nothing hypocritical he wasn't over here talking about something over there it was in him Christ lives in me he said the truth was in him revealed by the Holy Spirit who was the great teacher within him he lived it to the praise and the glory of God to him the gospel was it was just priceless beyond compare and it was not merely what he knew about God but the gospel was of God and it would be to others the means by which they could experience and know God themselves in their own hearts to him the gospel was a it was a portal into the majesty of God and into the glory of God and the wonder of God in the in the tenth verse of this second book of Timothy I'll just read the the verse he says but this I'm sorry I'll have to read verse nine verse who has saved us and called us with a holy calling not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before the world began but now is made manifest by the appearing of our savior Jesus Christ who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel amen and another translation uses the word that good thing the gospel to Paul was that good thing that God had revealed to him another translation calls it sound words another translation I remember reading decades ago it it turned the gospel here healing words Paul was conscious and confident about that which he was carrying and ministering he knew that it was a message of a supernatural that work of God we saw that in that ninth verse I've just read to you it was it was a work of God of sovereign work of God it was he wasn't talking about encouraging people to to try to create some self-imposed change to themselves this was this was a work of God wrought within the inner parts of a man or a woman and it had according to his teaching consequences consequences in respect to sin notice how Paul in Romans distinguishes between sin and sins we can't say any more about that just now but he knew that the gospel dealt with sin the core

issue within the unregenerate man and he knew that this gospel had the potential and power to break the power of what Wesley calls cancelled sin he cancelled it at Calvary the Holy Spirit in our contemporary personal lives applies his his dynamic and breaks the power the slavery to sin and ultimately as the result of this gospel we will find that it even deals with sin's presence as he takes us into his presence ultimately amen he knew that this gospel that he was carrying imparted into the indents of men and women who had faith and were responding and received the Spirit of God and imparted the power to live the holy life it's actually the Apostle Peter who once wrote he said that God has given unto us all things that pertain to life and godliness or all that we need to live godly in an ungodly world amen without the gospel there would be no justification without the gospel there would be no conviction without the gospel there would be no saving faith without the gospel there would be no power from on high without the gospel there'd be no sanctification without the gospel there'd be no glorification without the gospel no one would be His, Romans 8 and 9. Allow Wesley once more, speaking of this, he said, Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and nature's night, Thine eye diffused a quickening grey.

I woke, the dungeon flamed with light, My chains fell off, my heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. Glory, this is the gospel of God.

This is the body of truth, or at least I'm referring to this body of truth that was revealed to this apostle, this man that God had chosen and called and equipped for this great ministry. When I turn to the second epistle to Timothy, I meet the apostle again. But I meet him, if I'm thinking of him running strong in the race that God had set out before him, I find him here in this epistle and he's rounding the final curve and he sees before him the chequered flag.

He sees it from his position outwardly, which was on death row in a Roman dungeon. According to a Roman historian, that place where he was being held was the Mamatine prison and that historian describes it using words like neglect and stench and hideous and some other words also. And this great apostle, with this great message that he's been preaching and seeing it effecting the transformation that he'd known in the lives of other people and he's now in this position.

And the wonderful thing is, you know, as I read through this epistle, and we can't do very much about it in this session today, but I sense a tremendous composure in this great and mighty man of God. He's in a context where, humanly speaking, he's subjected to unthinkable psychological pressure. He's awaiting Nero's executioner to come to him.

It's inevitable, he knows that. This is the second time he's been incarcerated in Rome, but the first time was very different. He was in his own hired house and eventually he was exonerated.

This is totally different, he knows it's different, he knows what's ahead of him. In his own words, later in the fourth chapter he says, he knows that the time of his departure is at hand. But notwithstanding that, he's still running strong.

Glory to God. Or to change the analogy, the fire in his heart is still ablaze. Hallelujah.

And his mind is still razor sharp. He declares this, let me read a little bit more in that fourth chapter, as he's coming to the end of this important lesson. He says in the sixth verse, he says, I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.

I have fought a good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith.

Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day. And not to me only, but to them also that love is appearing. Yes, this man was still on fire in his heart.

He's still confident in his God. He's still running. His running shoes are still on, as it were, and he still remains stripped for the race, and he's running flat out, even at this late moment as he's approaching that chequered flag.

But look again at what's going on here. There are so many who are so quickly distracted in this race, and that is another part of the problem I alluded to right at the beginning. But for Paul, he faced so many disappointments, and so much was being done to his body, stoned and beaten and incarcerated, and so on, so many stories that we have.

There was enough to just break his heart. And I have to bring this into this context, as I see this great man with this great conversion, with this great commission, with this great message that he's been preaching through his public ministerial life. He's now in this prison.

He knows what's going to happen to him, but he's got his mind working. I said it's raised as sharp. He's not forgotten anything.

And he will say in writing this epistle, all they that were with me have turned away, have turned away from me. As he speaks to Timothy, he says, This thou knowest, you know this, Timothy, that all they which are of Asia have turned away from me, of whom is Phagellus and Hermogenes and Onesiorus. These are names, these three names I've just mentioned there from the 15th verse.

They're names etched into infamy of deserters, men who had been with the apostle. There's a temptation in my heart to think that one or more of them may have been involved in the eldership in the Ephesian church. Perhaps that's why the apostle speaks to Timothy in this letter and says, You know, Timothy, because Timothy, of course, was involved in ministry in Ephesus and so on.

But the fact of the matter was that the cost of staying on course, of following through, of continuing to run, to be refusing and rejecting all of the distractions and the appeals of the world and the flesh and the devil, that cost was too high for the integrity of so many that had been following him. Paul would remember that. But the fact of the matter is Paul himself, and let me just go back on this one phrase I've quoted already.

I can't even get my head around the phrase which says, All they of Asia have turned away from me. I've pondered that long and hard over the years. What did that really mean? Because that's where most of his ministry took place.

But I want to focus, I need to bring in these powerful negative issues, but at the same time I want to focus in on the heart and spirit of this man of God. He refused, clearly, he refused to be distracted. He made many statements that are recorded, scattered around in his epistles.

Statements that I love to read. When he says, for example, to the Corinthians, he said, All things are lawful unto me. Then he goes on to say, But I will not be brought under the power of any.

Don't you love that? This conviction, this integrity, this confidence, but ultimately this love for Jesus. He says, yeah, I can do a lot of things that wouldn't be breaking the law. But he said, I'm not doing those things.

I won't allow them to dominate my life and control my decision making or my value system or the course upon which God has established me. I won't do it. There's got to be that kind of attitude within our hearts.

Paul's going to be the first one to say that he can't do it of his own power. But there's got to be that response in the human heart that allows the power of God to enable us to know that victory. But there's nothing wishy-washy about the Apostle Paul.

I will not. He's writing to the Galatians and he says, and I think I read this, That I might preach him. That's what he was all about.

Perhaps there's no better scripture I could refer to than Philippians chapter 3 where Paul is speaking here and he says, Concerning zeal, if you know about my zeal, He said, I was persecuting the church. And then he goes on to say some other things. Then he goes on to say, but what things were gain to me? He said, those I counted loss for Christ.

Yea, doubtless, I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and do count them as done that I may win Christ and be found in him not having my own righteousness which is of the Lord but that which through the faith of Christ the righteousness which is of God by faith that I might know him, the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings being made conformable unto his death if by any means I might attain to the resurrection of the dead and then he goes on to say, I count not myself to have apprehended but this one thing I do, this one thing I do forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth for those things which are before I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Amen. This man was committed to Christ.

He was sold out, he was all in. What does that mean to you beloved? What does it mean to you? Where are you in all of this? Yes, Paul is a tremendous example and thank God for him and all that he's left behind for us but now it's my turn. I'm running the race, you're running the race.

For the apostle Paul, there was an ache in his heart this comes through plainly in this same epistle and the ache of his heart was that at all costs this gospel must not become corrupted or else all would be lost. The apostle Paul was spurred from witnessing the calamity that Constantine would bring upon the churches but sitting there in the squalor of that Roman cell he writes to Timothy and I'm going to just paraphrase what I believe the apostle was saying to Timothy it's as though he said, Timothy, my precious son these may well be my final words that I will speak to you listen carefully, I have some very important things to say to you. You know the second epistle to Timothy it's not an analytical treatise as was the epistle to the Romans this is a pastoral communication the central issue was the preservation of the true gospel which he had received from God.

He knew full well that there was a vulnerability about the situation and it would never be greater than it would be when he left he would know that because it's not conceit I'm not suggesting there was conceit in the mind of Paul but he knew that he'd occupied this very particular and special role and in his absence it would create a certain vulnerability within the churches and they didn't have New Testaments the New Testament was being written if you will but they didn't have New Testament scriptures to turn to and so there needed to be some man and men who will continue this work and I can't take that theme up on this occasion what Paul said to Timothy, we'll have to save that for another time but Paul had already seen the message being fiercely opposed and he'd referred to those when he was in Ephesus talking to the elders he said there are grievous wolves even among you he said to the elders who were before him rising up,

corrupting the message and so on he saw that, he saw that that was happening and this would be the ache of his heart and this letter to Timothy was not merely a friendly note that he was leaving for Timothy but it was a commissioning to him trusting that God would use what he would say to further equip and prepare Timothy for what lay ahead for him so where are we? where do we stand today? I know, you know, in so many cases the attractive Christianised institution has secularised the message and is secularising it they're making merchandise out of worship they're deifying numbers and deifying programmes and what we have in so many cases is virtually unrecognisable from the early church and the added tragedy to that is that so many in the rank and file are blithely ignorant of what has been lost and what they are missing I wasn't sure whether to do this but I think I will just want to say to you that many of you just getting to know me and reading bits and pieces about me or hearing me say different things but as a young man I was hugely blessed and privileged I never went to Bible college or Bible seminary but let me tell you what I did do I had the privilege of sitting under the ministry of some godly men whose lives impacted me greatly they never sought to draw me to themselves but taught me to listen to the inward teacher in my own ministry which I've had entirely by God's grace over 50 years now the Holy Spirit has taught me many things too many to talk about now but he's shown me very clearly that the message that I preach must primarily be the message of the Christian Gospel and I believe he's shown me I must not be just a voice rather I must be a voice but not an echo of someone else and that I must preach only what he makes real to me so clearly I'm not to be just some academic who studies information and gathers information and then cuts and pastes or whatever you do and perhaps with some natural gifting which I don't claim to have any stand up and teach others in that way but God was showing me no that's not the way as I'm sharing this with you I'm thinking of that man during the period of the Welsh Revival who when he preached he would preach with his head in a box can you believe it? in front of a congregation with his head in a box how far away we've moved even from that kind of humility and brokenness and selflessness in ministry but he made it clear I must only preach what he makes real to me in my life and I must never try to present an appealing an appealing presentation must never be part of my ministry I believe the Holy Spirit spoke to me showed me very clearly that he himself the Holy Spirit is the one and the only one that can bring conviction to men and women he's the only one that can impart that living seed of life I knew that I must never try to be in some way cool it sounds ridiculous for a man of my age to say that but I haven't always been this age not to try and adapt myself to appeal to certain categories of people and so on I must certainly never polish myself as though I'm some kind of CEO of an organization but that I must remember continually that I am but a cracked pot with the glory of the Spirit of God within my heart by his grace he showed us also my wife and myself that we must always look to him to supply our needs and that I must follow the Apostle's position Apostle Paul when he said he would rather die than put a price to the Gospel I mention these things because so many of these things are are so different and applied in such a different way in the churches in these days and I think they're indicators that we've lost something so valuable and missing the point and caught up and influenced by the spirit of consumerism and salesmanship and so on and so on Amen but we, I was saying the Lord showed us we must look to him to supply our material needs and that he would do it through through gifts of love from those who were in some sense appreciative of what God was able to minister to us and to keep it simple Amen Beloved, I don't know so many of you that are going to be listening to me but maybe the Spirit of God is saying something very important to you today he may be overturning some tables some of your tables he may be leading you to break some of your traditions to reset your values and unsubscribe from certain channels actual or otherwise but to turn your heart again toward him in an abandon and for many perhaps it's an abandon that you can remember experiencing just after the starter's pistol went off way back whenever that was but somehow you've allowed your heart to be discouraged and distracted and you've lost that cutting edge in

your life and in your ministry and God is speaking perhaps to you today to return and yield and surrender yourself fully and completely to him let me just pray Father only you know only you know what you have said and you know who you've said it to and I pray Father that by your Holy Spirit you will have great success in accomplishing your purpose even in these things that we've found from your scriptures and discovered along the journey of our own lives and the course of our running in this great race so Lord speak and work your works in Jesus' name Amen Amen just before I hand back to my brother just to let you know I know there are some people who listen multiple times to these messages but just to tell you they will be available many of them already are available on podcast and you can get information on our website which is mckenziefellowship.com or you can go to Turn to the Scriptures with Fred Tomlinson I encourage you to subscribe what that does doesn't cost you anything it just means that apart from being notified about the next message perhaps it enables us here in isolation to have a sense that here are men and women who are choosing to identify themselves with us in these days and become part of this online fellowship that God is producing and we welcome all your encouraging comments May God bless you Thank you Amen

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