

## ALL THE WAY TO THE TAPE

Colossians 4:7-18

There's a true story that I read again recently about a boy named Ryan who was just starting first grade. On his first day at lunch time he began packing up all of his stuff. His teacher, Linda, asked, "Ryan, what are you doing?" He reasonably replied, "I'm putting my stuff away because it's time to go home." Linda said, "Ryan, in first grade we stay here and eat lunch, then after lunch we come back to class to do some more work before it's time to go home." He looked at her in total disbelief. When he realized she was serious he put his hands on his hips and said, "Well, *who* on earth signed me up for this program?"

My guess is that you have had several occasions in your life when you felt exactly like Ryan. You've been hammering away, doing your best to work through something hard, and after a long time, it just gets worse. There's no end in sight and you think, "Who on earth signed me up for this program?" You likely also have thought, "Of more concern, how do I resign?" Laurie recently got a sweet note from a young 11-year-old girl who takes voice lessons from her. They are off for the summer. In the note the girl told Laurie she's going to miss being with her this summer and said that she loves taking lessons with her. She said when she's singing with Laurie it helps her forget all her troubles. Apparently even an 11-year-old has troubles. All of us are going to have moments where we feel that the only reasonable option for us is to find some way out, to call it quits. Today we're going to think about those kinds of moments and see if we can gain some perspective on them. We're going to look at the instructive example of two men who are mentioned in Colossians 4:7-18 where Paul makes his closing comments.

### PREMISE: CROSSING THE FINISH LINE MATTERS

These verses primarily consist of Paul passing on the greetings of some of his companions as well as some of his greetings to a few individuals in Colossae. He mentions some great people like Tychicus, a "dear brother, faithful minister and fellow servant." He was actually carrying Paul's letter to them. Then there is Mark, the cousin of Barnabus, who wrote the gospel of Mark, Epaphras, who was from Colossae and was instrumental in starting the church there, and Luke, who wrote the Gospel. Paul gives a special hello to Nympha, a godly woman in Colossae, and Archippus, a leader in the church.

But Paul mentions two men I want to focus on because they present quite a contrast that has significant implications for us. The first man is Aristarchus, who is mentioned in verse 10 as a "fellow prisoner." He first appears in the New Testament in Acts 19. Paul had been preaching in Ephesus for several months to great effect. Many people were believing in Jesus and leaving their former idol worship. This did not go without notice. There was a guy named Demetrius who was a silversmith specializing in making silver

idols of Artemis, the goddess whose temple was in Ephesus. He had a highly successful business with many subcontractors. He called them all together and in verses 25-27 we see him telling them, “You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made with human hands are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited.” The fear was that Artemis would be “robbed of her divine majesty.”

When you listen to that speech what seems to matter most to Demetrius? To me, it’s the first thing he mentioned. It was that their trade, by which they made a good income, would be discredited. Yes, people might stop worshipping Artemis, but the real issue was that Paul was hitting him in the pocketbook, so he was rallying in the troops to put an end to the threat.

His fellow tradesmen got the picture. This Paul was a clear and present threat to their financial well-being, so, Luke tells us in verse 28 they were “furious.” As is the case in so many aspects of life, it was all about the money. These people were afraid their thriving businesses were going to be gutted by this Paul and his new religion. They began a demonstration as we see in verse 29. “Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together.” For two hours the crowd shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.” It is estimated that the amphitheater in Ephesus, the ruins of which still stand, could seat as many as 30,000 people. So poor Gaius and Aristarchus were dragged into this theater and are faced with a mob of 20 or 30 thousand people shouting at them for two hours.

We’ve all seen the news broadcasts from the Middle East showing huge mobs of people shouting over and over, “Death to America” and other edifying slogans. This was a lot like that. I am quite sure it was terrifying to have that huge crowd venting its spleen at poor Gaius and Aristarchus. They stood firm, even though they likely thought they were not going to survive that day. They did survive, and went on to continue serving Christ.

Aristarchus had already endured riots in his home town of Thessalonica and neighboring Berea, so he had to be a strong guy because he did not cave in despite all those riots. Paul took up a collection of money for the impoverished Christians of Jerusalem. Aristarchus was one of the men chosen to help deliver the funds. He is mentioned in Acts 20:4 as traveling with Paul. In Jerusalem there is yet another riot. Aristarchus endures that one, then is with Paul when he is hustled out of town to save him from a plot against his life. Paul spent the next couple of years in prison, and Aristarchus stuck with him. Finally, Paul was put on a ship for Rome to appeal his case before Caesar and, according to Acts 27:4, Aristarchus is right there with him. It is possible that Aristarchus survived the

wreck of the ship they were traveling on. When Paul wrote Colossians, he was still in prison, and Aristarchus is right there with him.

Aristarchus had every reason to find some other pursuit in his life. He had been abused, subjected to multiple riots, avoided an assassination attempt that could have included him, hung in there through years of imprisonment, and likely survived a shipwreck. Now he's sticking with Paul through yet another imprisonment and trial. Nothing was going to stop this guy from ministering to and with Paul. Nothing. He was just as tough as nails.

We don't know as much about Demas. He would seem to be cut from the same cloth as Aristarchus, given the fact that he also is sticking with Paul despite the imprisonment. However, it turns out that Demas is something of a contrast to Aristarchus.

There is some disagreement about what happened to Paul and his friends after he wrote this letter. Some people believe that Paul was never released from prison after he wrote Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. They think his hearing before the emperor was delayed for a long time, but when he finally got it he was declared guilty, sentenced to death and ultimately executed.

However, other people believe that some time after Paul wrote this letter he finally got his hearing before the emperor and was acquitted. They think he was released from prison and spent a couple of more years ministering before he was once again arrested and put in prison. It is possible we get a glimpse of this in 2 Timothy 4:16-17 where he wrote, "At my first defense no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth." That sounds to me like he was delivered, meaning he got out of jail, and was able to proclaim the gospel in further parts of the Roman Empire so "all the Gentiles might hear it." But when he wrote 2 Timothy Paul was in prison again. This second imprisonment ended with his execution.

It is in that book that we see Demas for a second time. Paul was under no illusions. In 2 Timothy 4:6 he wrote, "The time for my departure is near." He knew he was about to die. What breaks my heart is that after all that Paul had done, after leading so many people to life in Christ, he was facing his final, difficult days almost alone. He wrote in verse 11, "Only Luke is with me." Some of that was because he had sent some of his best associates out on assignment. Timothy, Crescens, Titus, Tychicus and Mark were all in that category. But still, this great follower of Jesus is facing death with only one person standing by him. So he tells Timothy to pick up Mark and come see him quickly, knowing he has little time left.

Demas is mentioned in verse 10. “Demas, because he loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.” Demas was a deserter. “Desertion” is a powerful word. It means betrayal and cowardice. It means he had a post to stand, and he abandoned it. He had a friend who needed him and he quit on him. Demas had been a strong and faithful man who went through a lot with Paul. But it got to be too much. He could see what was going to happen to Paul and he feared that anyone who was as closely associated with him as he was faced the risk of sharing Paul’s fate. He feared he, too, would be condemned and executed if he continued to associate with Paul.

Demas was not a coward. He didn’t turn tail and run when the first shot was fired. If the interpretation that Paul was released and later arrested again is correct, then Demas had already hung in there through one imprisonment and more. But even if not, he certainly had stuck with Paul through hard times. At the end, his resolve cracked and he bailed out.

Paul and Barnabus butted heads after their first church planting trip because according to Acts 15:37-38, “Barnabus wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.” Paul did not want someone along he couldn’t count on. He didn’t want deserters with him. This suggests that he thought he could count on Demas. He had previously done so, and Demas had come through. Demas was for real as a follower of Jesus, a solid, stand-up guy. But he hit a point where he couldn’t take it anymore. He cut and ran.

Demas had put up with hardship and opposition, but he loved this present world. In other words, he liked staying alive and he began to fear if he stuck with Paul he wasn’t going to be in this world much longer. So he bailed out in order to save his neck. I don’t think Demas gave up on his faith. I think he still believed in Jesus. Had he cashed in his Jesus chips I believe Paul would have said something about that. He would have said he suffered shipwreck in regard to his faith the way he did with Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1 Timothy 1:19-20. In other words, I think it likely that Demas still believed in Jesus and still wanted to be a part of his church. I think we’ll see Demas in heaven.

Sadly, though Demas had been remarkable, though he had persevered through some hard times and scary stuff, he didn’t finish the race. He was like a guy who runs 24 miles of a marathon then gives up with 2 miles to go. He did a lot of good, but he didn’t finish well.

History is full of examples of God’s people failing to finish well. Solomon was chosen by God to be the king of Israel, the one who would build the great temple where God would be worshiped. He started off well. God told him to ask for whatever he wanted, and he asked for wisdom. What a good start. But then he didn’t use the wisdom God gave him. He violated all of the instruction that God passed to him about being the king. His example would be passed on to his son, Rehoboam, whose arrogance would lead to a

civil war. Only unlike the American Civil War that kept the Union intact, that civil war ended with two kingdoms, north and south. Solomon started well, but he compromised and his compromises led to disaster.

The history of Israel and Judah was replete with really crummy kings. There were a few bright spots. Two good ones were Asa and Joash. Chronicles 14:2 says, “Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord.” 2 Chronicles 24:2 says the same of Joash. But both of them flamed out. They both rebelled against God in their later years.

Would you like me to read a list of men who in the last 20 years or so have led large, highly visible Christian ministries but who have badly compromised and damaged their ministries and their own reputations? It is a sad litany that unfortunately has a long history.

A few years ago Laurie and I went out to eat one evening at one of our favorite Mexican restaurants. After we had ordered our meals a man showed up at our table and said, “Rick Myatt, it’s good to see you.” He looked familiar, but I didn’t have a clue who he was. He said, “You probably don’t recognize me,” then introduced himself. As soon as he said his name I knew who he was. I introduced Laurie to him and we chatted for some time. I can’t even remember his name now, though if I heard it again I’d recognize it. He was a guy who planted a church just a year or so after Laurie and I started one in Vista. He was a very intelligent guy. He was a charismatic leader and a dynamic speaker. His church quickly began growing. He made a terrific start. Until it all blew up a few years later. First his wife left him, then it came out that he had been having an affair with a woman in the church. He started well, but he did not finish. The good news is that today he is walking with the Lord and is doing well in another career. For that he is thankful, and so am I. But I can’t help thinking about what could have been.

Hebrews 10:36 says, “You need to persevere, so that when you have done the will of God you will receive what was promised.” You need to persevere. You need to finish the race. At the end of his life, even though others, like Demas, had wilted in the heat, Paul stood strong. In 2 Timothy 4:7 he wrote, “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” Paul finished the race. It doesn’t do much good if you are coming down the home stretch with a big lead, but then you stop a few yards from the finish line. You have to run all the way through the tape at the end or you lose. It’s not how you start that matters, it’s how you finish. Don’t you want to finish the race? Don’t you want to keep the faith all the way to the end?

WHAT CAN HELP US PERSEVERE?

***Knowing that we will be tested***

We need to prepare for the fact that we will have to persevere because things will be difficult. In John 12:31 Jesus referred to Satan as “the ruler of this world.” In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul called Satan “the god of this age.” Satan is the one who rules the way our world thinks. Do you believe this? Have you ever wondered why peer pressure is usually a bad thing? Why is it that peer groups don’t exert pressure on kids to be better behaved, obedient and respectful, wiser in their choices, more diligent in their studies? It is because this age is ruled by Satan.

The world is tilted against obedience toward God. It will always pull us toward rebellion against him, toward self-orientation. That means there will always be a price to pay for being faithful to God. Years ago I spent a summer at Purdue University in Indiana. Some friends and I decided one Saturday to rent canoes and paddle a ways up the nearby Tippecanoe River. We headed north up the river going against the current. We had to work really hard and went for about an hour and a half. We were pretty much exhausted and figured we’d better turn around or we wouldn’t have enough energy to paddle back. So we headed south with the current. We hardly paddled at all and made it back to our starting point in about 20 minutes. We learned that going against the current is exhausting. If you try to be faithful to God in this world you will always be paddling against the current. We all need to understand that and be prepared for it.

If we love this present world, if we want to go its way, we inevitably will compromise on being faithful to God. We need to be real clear about this. Following Jesus is not the way to become wealthier in this world. Yes, some followers of Jesus are wealthy, but the formula for wealth is not obey God and watch it happen. Following Jesus is not the way to become more powerful in this world. Following Jesus is not the way to become more popular here. There will always be a price to be paid for doing the will of God in a world ruled by Satan.

You will be tested. Abraham was promised by God that he would have a son and from him would come a great nation that God would use to bless the whole world. But then the years passed and no son showed up. What would he do? Would he believe that God would keep his promise, or would he just go his own way? Joseph was told by God that he would be a great leader one day, and that even his own family would bow to him. But then he was sold to slave traders. He ended up a slave, then after being falsely accused of a crime was thrown into prison where he languished for years.

David was told by God that he would be the king of Israel. But then King Saul lost his mind and went postal on him. David found himself on the run, hiding in caves, living as public enemy number one, not sure how he would survive. He had several opportunities to take matters into his own hands. Forget this wait on God’s promise idea. The only way you can save yourself, David, is to finish Saul off once and for all. As long as Saul was

alive you'll never be safe. But David refused to do it his own way. He was tested, time and again, and always he waited on God.

When you find yourself under pressure, longing to just quit and go with the flow because, after all, what has been happening to you isn't fair and it's worse than other people face, remember 1 Corinthians 10:13. "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind." If you want to follow Jesus, you will be tested. So you need to remind yourself what is happening. This is part of the deal of following Jesus. Everybody has to deal with it.

### ***Remembering the results***

Compromising God's will for some other "reward" is always a lie. Eve showed us that in the Garden of Eden. It looks good when lures are dangled in front of us, or when staying true means a long, hard, wearying slog and we're tired of it. But when we buy the lie we will always find that we are disappointed in the result. And it may be much worse than merely being disappointed. How do you think Demas feels about his decision today? How do you think Peter felt about his compromise when it got too scary to be identified with Jesus, so he denied even knowing him? Is it not apparent that whatever they got in the short term, in the long run they would say it was the worst decision they ever made?

There is a key scene in the movie *Rudy* that makes this point. The movie is based on the true story of Daniel Ruettinger. He was a smallish, slow, not very talented guy who played high school football and got grades that were average at best. Yet he dreamed of going to the University of Notre Dame, and not just attending, but playing football there. It was ridiculous. But through a lot of hard work and stubborn persistence he finally was admitted to the University and walked on to the football team. For two years he practiced with the team with no hope of ever even suiting up for a game. All along he had treasured the idea that for just one game he could suit up, walk out of that tunnel onto the field on game day and that his family, especially his dad, could see it. He had made a friend, an older man named Fortune, who was one of the groundskeepers. Rudy promised him that he would see him that game day. But there came a point when it looked like that dream was not going to be fulfilled. Rudy felt he would never get even that one chance to walk onto a field in a Notre Dame uniform. Discouraged, he gives up. He informs Fortune that he has decided to quit the football team. In the crucial scene Fortune finds him and says, "Since when are you the quitting kind?" Rudy spills out his disappointment and says there is no point in going on. He says, "I wanted to prove..." Fortune interrupts him and says, "Prove what?" "That I was somebody." Fortune says, "You're so full of it. You're five feet nothing, a hundred and nothing and have hardly a speck of athletic ability. But you hung in there with the best football team in the land. And you're going to walk out of this university with a degree." Still disappointed, Rudy tells Fortune that he's sorry he won't be able to get him to see his first game. Fortune had told him he had never seen a game from the seats of that stadium but promised that he'd be there when Rudy got his

chance. Fortune says, “I’ve seen too many games in this stadium.” Rudy says, “I thought you said you hadn’t...” Fortune says, “I haven’t seen a game from the stands.” The truth dawns on Rudy. “You were a player?” Fortune says, “I rode the bench for two years. Thought I wasn’t being played because of my color. I got filled with a lot of attitude, so I quit. And not a week goes by that I don’t regret it. And I guarantee that not a week will go by in your life that you won’t regret letting them get the best of you.”

We will regret it if we quit, if we compromise. That’s the message of that movie, and it is true. It was true for Peter. My suspicion is that it was true for Demas as well. But there is a positive side of this message. There is a reward for perseverance. There is a reward stored up for us in heaven, but there is even a reward for us in this life. Writer Bob Welch, whom some of you have met, told a story in his book, *A Father For All Seasons*, that illustrates this. His son, Jason, was playing baseball in a league for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Jason had not taken the field in three years without being the smallest player on either team. In this particular incident this was especially noticeable because he was a 7<sup>th</sup> grader standing 4 feet 9 inches. This day the other team had a fireball-throwing man child on the mound who stood more than a foot taller than Jason. He blazed a fastball that Welch didn’t think Jason even saw. Strike one. He threw a second scorching pitch, strike two. Jason seemed badly overmatched. He had no chance. The third pitch was wild, going right at Jason. Jason turned and bailed out, falling to the ground as his bat and helmet went flying. It appeared the ball had grazed him so the umpire said, “Take your base.” But Jason got up, stayed right there and said, “It didn’t hit me.” The umpire said, “Take your base, son.” Welch wrote, “Our fans were most likely thinking the same thing I was: take your base, son. You’ve been wounded, soldier. Your war’s over. You’re going home.” Jason said, “But honest, it didn’t hit me.” The ump looked at the infield ump, who just shrugged. Then the umpire said, “Ok, the count is one and two.” Welch, who was coaching at third base, thought about intervening, but Jason was already digging in at the batter’s box. The giant pitcher rocked and fired another bullet, the kind of pitch that would surely send Jason back to the dugout in defeat. Instead, Jason swung and ripped the ball into left center for a stand up double. The crowd just roared. The coach of the other team was standing a few feet away from Welch. He had no idea that Jason was his son. He spit out some sunflower seeds, shook his head and said, “Man, you gotta love that.”

Even an opposing coach was happy to see a kid persevere in doing the right thing and be rewarded for it. Somewhere down deep we all admire that and long for it. We want to be the person who refuses to quit, who endures for the long haul and finishes the race. No one wants the stigma of being a quitter. In the original *Star Wars* movie it was disappointing when Han Solo bailed out before the final battle because it looked too hard, too dangerous. And, of course, everyone was thrilled when he couldn’t live with that; he changed his mind and showed up at the crucial moment to save the day.

### ***Remembering failure isn't forever***

Unfortunately, we all know that we are not perfect. We can all usually find multiple occasions in our lives when we compromised, when we quit following Jesus, even if it was only for a brief time. We need to remember that such failures are not final.

Romans 8:38-39 remind us that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing in all of creation. That includes our own failures. Isn't that one of the big lessons of Peter's life? At the worst possible moment he also cracked and ran. He repeatedly denied even knowing Jesus when Jesus needed someone to stand with him more than ever. That failure was brutal, indefensible, and the guilt of it was crushing.

But that was not the end of the story. Jesus restored Peter to his position of leadership, telling him to "feed my sheep." He was saying that though Peter had failed, though he compromised horribly, he was still forgiven, still loved, and still trusted by Jesus.

Did you notice Paul's mention of Mark in verse 10? He was one of the faithful ones who ministered with Paul. But he wasn't always like that. Remember the passage cited earlier where Paul and Barnabus had a falling out? It was because of Mark, who had deserted them on their first church planting trip. Paul didn't trust Mark and didn't want him along with them. But here years later that same guy is now serving Paul. Near the end of his life in 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul asked Timothy to bring Mark to him.

### ***Relying on Jesus***

It is essential that we take note of what Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:17. He was on trial for his life before Nero. There was no reason to believe he was going to get a fair hearing before a man who was clearly a violent nut job who had decided he hated Christians. Every one of Paul's friends was gone, he was all alone. But he said, "But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength." Jesus was right there with him and gave him the ability to refuse to compromise. He enabled him to stand firm when he had no one else.

So the question is, do you think that happened for Paul because he was unique? Remember that Jesus said, "I am with you always." If we will look to him we will find that he stands with us as well. In Psalm 109:30 David said he would greatly extol the Lord. Then in verse 31 he said, "For he stands at the right hand of the needy." He doesn't stand at the right hand of the holy, or the good, or the religious or the strong, but at the right hand of the needy. If you ever feel needy you are in a good place, for the Lord is right there with you.

Jeremiah 20 contains some heartbreaking words. In verse 7 the prophet revealed what life was like for him as he told people the truth. "You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived. I am ridiculed all day long, everyone mocks me." It gets worse in verse 10. "I hear many whispering, 'Terror on every side. Denounce him! Let's denounce him!' All my friends

are waiting for me to slip, saying, ‘Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take revenge on him.’” Did you hear what he said? His *friends* were hoping he would slip and were anxious to “take revenge” on him. Those were friends? I’d hate to think what his enemies were doing.

That sounds to me like a situation ripe for calling it quits. The poor guy has no friends he can count on and he feels like God pulled a dirty trick on him by luring him into his role as a prophet. It was all bad. I can easily imagine him saying, “If this is how you’re going to treat me, Lord, I think I’d like to hand in my resignation. I’m looking for a job as a greeter at Walmart.” However, in verse 11 Jeremiah wrote, “But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior, so my persecutors will stumble and will not prevail.” Speaking of *Star Wars*, the prophet was like Luke in the cantina when he ran afoul of a couple of thugs and he said, “I’ll be more careful.” The worst thug said, “You’ll be dead,” as he prepared to carve Luke up. But the mighty Jedi knight, Obi Wan, was with Luke, and he stepped in to save the day. So you’re saying the Lord is like Obi Wan? Not my point. I’m saying that the Lord is with you and will strengthen you.

When Paul was struggling and pleading with God to take away some difficulty he was being tormented by, his thorn in the flesh, God’s answer in 2 Corinthians 12:9 was “my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Tim Brown tells the story of his friend Tim Vanderveen from years ago. Vanderveen was tall, strong, handsome and intelligent. He graduated from Hope College and launched a career in business. He was a charismatic guy, liked by everyone, and he immediately found great success. He seemed to be on his way. One day he called Brown and sounded bad. He said he had the flu. It turned out that it wasn’t the flu, it was leukemia. He fought the disease, but it was a losing battle. Many months later Brown visited him in the hospital. He was a shell of his former self, lying on his side in the hospital bed, so weak he could not even roll over on his own. His mom was in the room, weeping. Brown said he walked next to the bed and knelt down so he could hear Vanderveen. His friend said in a painfully weak voice, “I’ve learned something, Tim.” Brown said, “What have you learned?” “Life is not like a VCR.” Brown said he didn’t understand what he meant, so he said, “How is life not like a VCR?” Vanderveen answered, “You can’t fast forward through the bad parts.” He paused then went on, “But I have also learned Jesus is in every frame, and that’s just enough.”