Finishing Well
Hebrews 12:1-3 & Genesis 9:18 – 29

Let's pray – Gracious God, Creator of heaven and earth, you are the One who knows the deepest and most intimate thoughts and attitudes of our hearts and minds. Would you open the eyes of our hearts today and shine the light of your truth into our minds, illuminating the darkness with your very presence, so that we might understand ourselves better and surrender more fully to your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.

INTRODUCTION – Finishing Well

I wonder how many here are familiar with Aesop's Fables? [Hold up book.] We had this book in our home growing up and I read it repeatedly. Maybe you'll recognize some of the stories in the book … The Boy that Cried Wolf, The Goose and the Golden Eggs, The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing, the Fox and the Grapes.

Perhaps the most well-known one is the story of the Hare and the Tortoise. In modern times we often switch the order of title, calling it "The Tortoise and the Hare," to emphasize the characteristics of the Tortoise. But today, I'm calling it by its original title "The Hare and the Tortoise," because we are going to focus more on what happened with the hare than the tortoise.

I have used AI to create some illustrations for the story so you can watch the images as we go. It's a short story. Listen now, as I read it to you.

The Hare and the Tortoise

[SLIDE 1] *A Hare was always boasting about his speed and sneering at a Tortoise because he was so slow. One day the Tortoise said, "You may laugh at me, but if we ever had a race I know I could beat you." "Ridiculous!" said the Hare. "Is it?" said the Tortoise. [SLIDE 2] We shall see. Are you ready?"*

They started up at once and, of course, the Hare quickly outran the Tortoise [SLIDE 3] who merely crawled along. The Hare, in fact, was so far ahead that he treated the whole matter as a joke and lay down. [SLIDE 4] "I'll take a little nap here in the grass," he said to himself, "and when I wake up, I'll finish the race far ahead."

[SLIDE 5] Nevertheless, the Hare overslept himself and when he arrived at the finish line, the Tortoise, who had plodded steadily along, [SLIDE 6] was there ahead of him."

The race is not always to the swift; slow and stead is sure to win.[i]

The Bible speaks of our spiritual journey, or our faith, as a race. Hebrews 12:1-3 say this:

[1]Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. [2]Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, that author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. [3]Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

As people of faith, we are clearly called to finish well the race set out before us. Biblically speaking, finishing well has to do with maintaining enthusiasm for God, keeping our spiritual integrity, being faithful and persevering in our relationship with God, until the very end of our life, despite the challenges that arise and throwing off sin that so easily entangles. This requires that we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus instead of earthly distractions.

The problem is that though many people start off strong in their faith, like the Hare in Aesop's Fable sadly, over time, some get cocky or distracted, taking their eyes off the prize. They slip up, and they don't end up finishing well spiritually.

The Bible makes it very clear that no-one is immune to mis stepping. It says we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The Bible also shows honestly that even the great heroes of our faith are prone to mess up from time to time.

Last week we read about one such hero who slipped up – Noah. Like the Hare in Aesop's fable, Noah started off very well. While the whole world had become corrupt and wicked, Noah, alone of all the people in his generation was righteous. God's favor was upon Noah. Noah did everything that God commanded him to do. God preserved Noah and his family from the great flood that was sent in judgement upon the evil in the world. They all survived in the ark. Everything seemed to be going well when they first stepped off the boat onto dry land. Noah offered God a sacrificed which pleased God. God made a promise to never again destroy the earth in a flood and gave the rainbow as the sign of the covenant promise.

Shortly after this however, Noah slipped up. Last Sunday, we discussed what happened through the lens of family dysfunction. We talked about how all families are imperfect and have some level of dysfunction because all people are imperfect and have some level of dysfunction too.

Today we're going to read the same passage again from Genesis 9. But this time we'll look at the story more through the lens of what it means to finish well.

You'll hear me say this repeatedly. Everyone makes mistakes. The wise learn from their mistakes. But the wisest among us learn from others' mistakes. Learning from the mistakes of others means we don't have to make the same mistake ourselves.

Let's read Genesis 9:18-28 now and see what we can learn from Noah's life and Noah's mistakes so that we are better equipped to finish our spiritual race well.

Genesis 9:18-29

9 18 The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham
was the father of Canaan.) 19 These were the three sons of Noah, and from them came
the people who were scattered over the whole earth.

20 Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded[a] to plant a vineyard. 21 When he drank some of
its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. 22 Ham, the father of
Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. 23 But Shem and
Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward
and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that
they would not see their father naked.

24 When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to
him, 25 he said,

"Cursed be Canaan!
The lowest of slaves
will he be to his brothers."

26 He also said,

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Shem!
May Canaan be the slave of Shem.
27 May God extend Japheth's[b] territory;
may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,
and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth."

28 After the flood Noah lived 350 years. 29 Noah lived a total of 950 years, and then he
died."

So, what missteps did Noah make in the later part of his life?

Noah's obvious sin was getting drunk.

This story is the first time wine is mentioned in the Bible, and the outcome was clearly not good since Noah drank too much of it. So, are we to conclude from this story that because Noah misused alcohol here that the Bible always condemns it's use?

<u>In other words, is drinking wine a sin? The answer is no. The Law, the Writings and the Prophets– what the Israelites had as their scriptures and what Christians call the Old Testament – all speak of wine as something for us to enjoy.</u>

When Moses was laid out various aspects of out God's law for the Israelite people, he specified that one tenth of all the produce of their fields was to be set aside as holy to the Lord each year. The people were to eat this holy tithe in the presence of the Lord, at the temple. But if they lived too far away this might prove to be difficult. For example, if you birthed 100 sheep then you'd have to take 10 lambs with you. That would be challenging if you lived a long way away. So there was a provision that if they couldn't carry all their tithes with them, they could exchange their produce for silver, take the silver with them to the Temple, and there, buy food to eat, in the presence of the Lord. Here is what the Law of Moses said they could buy when they got to the temple.

Deuteronomy 14:26-27

26 *Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice.* ***27*** *And do not neglect the Levites living in your towns, for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own.*

God explicitly told the Israelite people they could buy wine and fermented drinks to enjoy in his presence. The one stipulation was that they were to share with the Levites whose job was to care for the Temple and lead in the worship at the temple. The point was that they were all to feast with joy in God's presence and that feasting included wine.

In praising God for the way he cares for and provides for all things on earth, the psalmist says in Psalm 104:15 that:

He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate—
bringing forth food from the earth:
15 *wine that gladdens human hearts,*
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their hearts.

Wine, which gladdens the hearts of man, is one of the many blessings of God that the Psalmist was praising God for.

The Isaiah 25:6-8 the Prophet Isaiah foretold a day when:

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
7 *On this mountain he will destroy*
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
8 *he will swallow up death forever.*

The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.

According to the prophet Isaiah, when God brings an end to death, when he wipes away every tear from our faces, there will be great feasting that will include wine. Not just any wine, but aged wine, the finest wine.

Jesus picked up this theme in the New Testament. At the wedding in Cana, he turned water to wine, and it wasn't just any old wine. It was the best wine they had had all night (John 2:1-11).

In Matthew 26:29 at the last supper, Jesus told his disciples that he would not drink from the fruit of the vine again until the day when he drank it new with them in his Father's kingdom.

So, if drinking wine is not a sin, then what was the problem with what Noah did?

Well, Noah's problem was that he drank to excess. Even as the Bible conveys the idea that wine is a sign of blessing and can be part of a joyful celebration, it also cautions us very clearly about the destructive effects of drinking too much and repeatedly warns us not to get drunk.

Proverbs 20:1 " Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler;
whoever is led astray by them is not wise."

Proverbs 23:29-32
29 Who has woe? Who has sorrow?
Who has strife? Who has complaints?
Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?
30 Those who linger over wine,
who go to sample bowls of mixed wine.
31 Do not gaze at wine when it is red,
when it sparkles in the cup,
when it goes down smoothly!
32 In the end it bites like a snake
and poisons like a viper.

Proverbs 31:4 "It is not for kings, Lemuel—
it is not for kings to drink wine,
not for rulers to crave beer,
5 lest they drink and forget what has been decreed,
and deprive all the oppressed of their rights.

So clearly those in leadership and in authority are to be sober so they can discharge their duties well.

Sometimes people say the Bible contradicts itself. But what is often happening is that it is setting up guard rails for us. One on each side of the issue. In this case, it seems like the Bible does that too.

The Bible presents both sides of the coin when it comes to consuming fermented beverages. When used in moderation, it can be enjoyed as a gift from God. But the Bible never condones getting drunk and in fact cautions against it and warns of the dangers of misusing it. While the apostle Paul in the New Testament told Timothy that a little wine was good for his stomach, that same Paul also wrote in

Ephesians 5:18
18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit,"

So, Noah's sin was not that he drank wine, it is that that he drank too much wine.

And often that is our problem too. It's not that we eat a little sugar. It's that we eat too much sugar. It's not that we spend a little money shopping online. It's that we spend too much money on Amazon or whatever our favorite place to shop is.

So, why did Noah drink too much wine so that he got drunk?

The Bible doesn't tell us why Noah got drunk. We can only speculate. And perhaps in that sense we can relate. Because we often don't understand the reasons why we do the things we do either, do we?

Perhaps Noah was overcome with emotional and psychological distress having watched God's judgement on the world carried out through the massive flood. Perhaps he was haunted by the loss of family and friends who had died in this world altering event. Perhaps he had survivor's guilt. Many people today turn to alcohol to try and numb out negative emotions or bury traumatic memories. Maybe that is what Noah was doing.

Or maybe he didn't know what he was doing. Maybe he got drunk accidentally. Certainly, grapes had grown in the wild prior to the flood, but verse 20 tells us Noah intentionally planted a vineyard. Some translations say he was the first to plant a vineyard. Perhaps the amount of wine produced by cultivated grapes was more than he had ever had access to when the grapes were collected in the wild. So perhaps he had access to more wine than he had ever had in the past and he didn't know his limits. Sometimes that happens when kids go off the college.

Or maybe his drunkenness was caused by his old age. After the flood, people didn't live as long anymore. They aged much faster. Perhaps in this case, Noah didn't realize how much he had aged and didn't realize he could not drink as much wine as he could in his younger days before the flood, without feeling the effects. Still today that is one of the dangers of alcohol. Knowing when to stop requires good judgement, but good judgement is hard to have when one is drinking alcohol.

As Noah found out, drinking too much can lead to a snowball effect of problems. On waking up, one often realizes that the original problem is still there – it has not gone away and now it is compounded by the negative effects and bad consequences of what often happened when one was under the influence.

For this reason, many Christians today completely avoid alcohol to avoid misuse themselves or to avoid being a stumbling block to others. The reasoning is shaped by passages such as Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10 which focus us not on our own liberty to do whatever we like, but on the principals of Christian love and concern for the weaknesses and needs of those around us as well. In Romans 14:21 Paul says – "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything to cause your brother to stumble."

So there is an aspect of our Christian living that has do with caring for the wellbeing of the whole community and not just our individual rights and freedoms. When we live in a way that we are mindful and careful of the spiritual welfare and needs of those around us we reflect the loving heart of God.

Jesus gave up all the pleasures and privileges of heaven for a season, to come to earth to save us. And sometimes, we too might choose to give up certain pleasures and privileges for a season if it helps those around us live better and healthier lives too.

Certainly, this is the attitude Shem and Japheth took when they were told that their father was lying naked in his tent, having passed out from too much wine. They chose to walk into Noah's tent backward and cover him up, never once looking at his nakedness, to restore his dignity.

We talked about this last week. How in doing this, they followed God's lead when God covered up Adam and Eve with animal skins after their wayward and sinful act of disobedience in the garden. There is a loving, tender mercy that we see in God, even when we sin. And Shem and Japheth modelled that as well.

In contrast, Ham did not follow God's lead when he saw his dad naked and went out and gossiped or mocked and disrespected his dad.

And so, when Noah woke up and heard what had happened, you can be sure he didn't hear about it from Shem and Japheth. Whoever had gossiped about it and the gossip got back to him, it had come from Ham, hadn't it. And so Noah, realizing what happened, cursed not Ham – we talked about his last week – but he cursed his grandson Canaan and then praised God. Wait a sec.

I haven't seen a commentator write about this, but if you recall from the book of James, which Rev. Janet has preached through for us this year, the Bible has something to say about praising God and then cursing another person.

James 3:7-12

7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been
tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of
deadly poison.

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings,
who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and
cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt
water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives,
or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

So, it would appear to me that Noah's second misstep might have been cursing his grandson and the praising God in the same breath.

Certainly, this is not the best way to heal wounds we incur in our families, is it? It can be quite tempting to curse those who hurt us and then come to church and worship God. But this is not a godly path.

With that said, it seems like Noah's words were more of prophecy about what would happen to the descendants of Canaan, than just the cursing of an angry man waking up from a drunken stupor.

Somehow Noah foresaw that the moral flaws and failings shown in Ham's actions would be compounded in his son Canaan's line of descent. We don't have time today to get into all that today, but certainly over time this proved true. Noah saw in Ham something he also saw in Canann, and he spoke prophetically about it. In time the Canaanites would be involved in:

- *Idolatry: Worshipping multiple gods and idols, often involving rituals that were considered abominable.*
- *There was sexual Immorality: often including temple prostitution, adultery.*
- *They would do Child Sacrifice: engaging in the awful practice of sacrificing children to their deities, particularly to Molech.*
- *There was Violence and Murder*

[https://search.yahoo.com/search?fr=mcafee&type=E210US105G91985&p=what+were+the+sins+of+the+canaanites]

All these things and more developed in the line of Canaan, and somehow Noah foresaw that when he uttered his prophetic curse. For these sins they were eventually evicted from the land of Canaan by Shem's descendants, the Israelites.

That does raise another question. If someone utters a curse, does it automatically come to pass?

Did bad things happen to Canaan and his descendants because Noah cursed him, or did Noah prophetically see the sin that Canaan was going to engage in and so condemned his behavior and prophetically pronounced a curse understanding that bad things would come to Canaan's descendants because of their bad behavior? It is most likely the latter.

The Bible is clear that undeserved curses do not take effect. Proverbs 26:2 says, "like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse does not come to rest."

That means bad things don't automatically happen to someone just because some angry person curses them. An angry person venting is just an angry person venting and expressing what they wish would happen. That doesn't obligate God to do have to do that thing the angry person wished for. He is not a genie in a bottle.

With that said, there may be bad things that come into a persons' life because of their sin or disobedience to God, but it isn't because someone cursed them. It's because they are reaping the consequences of their bad behavior. And bad behavior has consequences.

So, while someone might curse another person that doesn't mean the curse will happen and God is not bound to make it happen.

Recall the story of the prophet Balaam. An enemy king tried to hire the Balaam to curse the Israelite people. But God forbade Balaam from cursing them and he only permitted Balaam to pronounce words of blessing over the Israelites instead.

God's desire truly is to bless us. The path of blessing is obedience to God. But if we choose to live in disobedience then we reap the consequences which usually involve suffering and sorrow. In the Bible whether we live with God's blessing on our life or whether we live under a curse has to do with our own choices to obey or disobey God.

The Bible also makes clear that God desires for people to repent of their wrongdoing and find grace rather than live under a curse.

To Summarize what we have discussed today -

Noah started off strong. For 600 years he did the right thing. But in the later part of his life he missed the mark. He sinned, and the effects of that sin rippled through his family line for generations.

Many people, like Noah start off strong in their faith. But over time they get distracted or slip up. They sin, and they don't finish well. This leads us to a final question – How do we make sure we don't slip up?

How can we finish well?

1. Cultivate daily intimacy with God - finishing well requires we maintain consistent spiritual disciplines like prayer, scripture reading, connecting with God, just spending time in God's presence.

2. Guard our thought life. Complacency, distractions, temptations can all pull us off course. To counter this we must live with a pure and humble spirit. Being careful of the thoughts that we let our minds linger on.

3. Stay engaged with the mission. The main thing we are to be about is discipleship. We can't coast. We must always be active in serving others and sharing the gospel.

4. Lean into community. We need godly friends, mutual encouragement to stay strong and weather the storms. When we isolate ourselves we are more prone to temptations and giving into things that are not good for us.

5. We must depend on God's grace. Let God do the heavy lifting. Enduring till the end is possible only as we avail ourselves of God's mercy and grace. It is not something we can accomplish with human will power alone. That's where cultivating the daily intimacy with God comes in. It allows us to lean on God's grace.

6. We must not ever think that just because we are older God is done with us. Retirement from a career is not retirement from God's kingdom. Even as we get older, we have a lot to offer. Psalm 92:12-14 says "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree. They will still bear fruit in old age." That's what we are after. Bearing fruit all throughout our life, even in old age. Finishing well.

Noah's story is a warning to us all: Finishing well is not automatic. The greatest threat to an older person's faith is not usually persecution. It is complacency. We must guard our thought lives and habits all throughout our life if we are to leave a healthy legacy for those who follow after us.

Conclusion

As I was preparing for this message, I came across a quote that I thought summed it up beautifully –

"Beginning well is a momentary thing, finishing well is a lifelong thing."

Sadly, this comment was made by a man who started well but failed to live up to that lifelong thing. Ravi Zaccharias – a world-renowned Christian apologist and evangelist. He was instrumental in helping many people come to faith and think through their faith. BUT sadly, we learned at the end of his life that he had used his reputation both in the US and abroad to abuse a lot of women. That should never have happened. It's an awful thing.

The reality is that whether we are in the church, or the government, or the military, or the schools, or business, or even families, these things happen. They are never okay. These kinds of stories are heartbreaking and terrible. It is not alright.

What hope is there for the rest of us? If even godly men like Noah can mess up, if people like Ravi Zaccharias can mess up. What hope is there for the rest of us? That hope lies in humility. In never believing that we are above it. In always holding to the idea that, "But for the grace of God, there goes me."

Don't ever think we are immune to getting off course. Live every day, and every temptation as if it is the one that will sink your ship.

If we do this, then like the apostle Paul we too will be able to say at the end of our lives, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." (2 Tim 4:7-8)*. This is what we should all be striving for. Will you finish well the race set out before you?

Let's pray. Gracious God, thank you that you don't hide the truth of what happens in each person's life. Even in the Bible, you lay it out plainly for us to see. It is so easy to get tempted and pulled off course. Even Noah who lived a righteous life for 600 years could fall victim to temptations to sin and give into the brokenness of humanity at the end of his life. So too, many others have as well. Help us pray, to keep a hold of your hand. To stay humble in heart. To stay connected to you. To listen to the voice of your spirit, so that we might finish well the race that you have set out for us. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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