

2 Tim 4:7 Aspirations for the New Year New Years 2022

Once upon a time, Mr. Hare was making fun of Mr. Tortoise for being so slow. "Do you ever get anywhere?" he asked with a mocking laugh. "Yes," replied the Tortoise, "and I get there sooner than you think. I'll race you and prove it." The Hare was much amused at the idea of running a race with the Tortoise, but just for fun he agreed. So the Fox, who had consented to act as judge, marked the distance and started the runners off.

The Hare was soon far out of sight, and to make the Tortoise feel very deeply how ridiculous it was for him to try a race with a Hare, he lay down beside the course to take a nap until the Tortoise should catch up.

The Tortoise meanwhile kept going slowly but steadily, and, after a time, passed the place where the Hare was sleeping. But the Hare slept on very peacefully; and when at last he did wake up, the Tortoise was near the finish line. The Hare now ran his swiftest, but he could not overtake the Tortoise in time.

The moral of the story: the race is not always to the swift, but to those who keep moving toward the goal.

I don't know if Paul knew this fable, but he clearly understood the principle. He knew that he was approaching the finish line of his life, and he could say with confidence that he had run his race faithfully.

2 Tim 4 is the last chapter in the last book Paul wrote. In this chapter, Paul mentions that he expects to die soon. He says that he is already being offered like a sacrifice. He expected not to live much longer when he wrote this, and he was right.

Today I want to consider just one verse from Paul's last words—2 Tim 4:7. Paul said these things at the end of his life, but I want us to apply them to the new year that stretches out before us.

When Paul said these words, he was fairly certain that he'd be dying in the near future. He knew what the future held for him—his death was imminent. But as he looks back, he concludes that he had made good use of his life. He'd been engaged in the great spiritual battle; he'd finished the work that God had laid out for him to do; he had been faithful.

We don't know what's going to happen in the course of the next year. Perhaps some of us will face death or tragedy this year. On the other hand, for some of us, 2022 might be one of the best years ever. Only God knows what is in store for us this year.

Paul was evaluating his life in light of eternity. As we begin the year, we can have the same attitude as Paul had at the end of his life. At the end of this year, we should be able to say the same things Paul said in 2 Tim 4:7.

Let's look at the three phrases Paul used in this passage and see how they might apply us in the new year.

I. Fight the good fight.

A. The Bible often describes the Christian life in terms of a fight/battle/struggle.

1. Our fight against Satan and the principalities and powers of darkness is like a wrestling match (Eph 6:10f). Cf. 1 Pet 5:8.

2. Our fight against our own inner sinful desires is like a boxing match (1 Cor 9:24f; Gal 5:17). The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. Cf. Rom 7.

3. We also fight against the enemies of the Gospel. Paul mentioned that he had "fought with beasts" in Ephesus (1 Cor 15:32). He described opponents of the Gospel as "beasts." He was almost constantly under threat by his enemies. They tried to kill him many times. Here's Paul's description of his experiences:

2 Co 11:25–27 ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; ²⁶ in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren

On many occasions, Paul was literally fighting for his life.

B. None of us face any kinds of threats and dangers like that. However, the Christian life is a struggle, a fight. Our enemies are the world, the flesh, and the devil. We struggle against both external foes and internal failures.

C. Like Paul, we should aim to fight the good fight. How do we do that?

1. Play offense.

a) The good fight involves proclaiming the Gospel message. We want to go on offense by bringing the Good News to those who do not know it.

- b) Part of that offensive battle involves standing up for righteousness. “Having done all, to stand.”
 - c) The good fight involves attacking our spiritual enemies—especially the world and the flesh.
 - d) The good fight involves attacking ourselves—our inner sinful desires. Our goal is to put sin to death. We want to destroy sin before it destroys us.
2. Play defense.
 - a) The list of armor in Eph 6 is largely defensive. The breastplate, the shield, and the helmet are all defensive in use. We want to stand up under the attacks of our enemies. We endure these attacks without wavering.
 - b) The fight involves defending the faith against those who would tear it down. Cf. 1 Pet 3:15—always be ready to give an answer/defense for what we believe.
 3. So the fight involves reaching others with the Gospel, personal self-discipline, and defending the faith against our spiritual enemies. We fight on offense and we fight on defense.
 4. And we all should be involved in this great struggle. All of us should be involved in proclaiming the Gospel, disciplining ourselves for proper behavior, and defending the faith against skeptics and critics. These are all normal elements of the Christian life. We are at war.
 5. If you are not engaged in some way in these battles, you are not living a normal Christian life. The normal Christian life involves fighting and struggling. We should all see ourselves as Christian soldiers marching as to war...
- D. People often have wrong ideas about the Christian fight.
1. Some say not to bother fighting. Just give in; indulge yourself. You can't live a perfect Christian life, so don't even bother trying a good Christian life. Just admit defeat and give in to the enemy. God loves you so much that he overlooks your failures, so don't bother resisting sin for fighting against the enticements of the world and the flesh.

2. On the other hand, some say that the Christian life is so victorious that there is no continuing struggle. If you were a really spiritual believer, you would not struggle against the desires of the flesh. If we are fully committed to Christ—if we have surrendered all and sold out for God—we would be victorious; the fight is over. You can reach a “higher plane” where you no longer struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil.
 3. But the biblical expectation is that the fight will continue as long as we are in this body. We will continue to wrestle and fight against our spiritual enemies. We will continue to face temptations. We don't indulge in sin, nor do we think that we are totally victorious over sin. We continue to struggle to do what is right and avoid what is wrong.
 4. Only when we get to heaven with this fight be finished. Until that time, we must engage in this battle every day.
- E. The Bible gives us further instructions regarding how to fight this battle.

1Tim 1:18 ... *war a good warfare; (or “fight the good fight”)*

1Tim 6:12 *Fight the good fight of faith, ...*

1. We fight a good fight *by faith*. This is a spiritual battle that we engage by faith. We engage in this battle through spiritual resources—i.e., prayer, Bible study, church attendance, partnership with other believers.
2. We must put on the whole armor of God (Eph 6:11f). We must do all we can to stand firm in the battle. We live in an evil day, and we must withstand the onslaughts of the enemy. We must be committed to truth, righteousness, peace, faith, the word of God and prayer. This is how we face our enemies and withstand them.
3. We must use the proper weapons. We are engaged in a spiritual fight.

2Co 10:3-4 *For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare [are] not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;)*

The basis of the fight is spiritual. We are engaged in these fights because of spiritual values.

Our weapons are spiritual—things like prayer and Bible reading and faith and fellowship and worship and evangelism and service. That's how we win our battles.

4. Put on the mind of Christ.

1Pe 4:1 *Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: ...*

We must remain Christ-like in our battles. It's easy to use underhanded and sinful methods in battles against our opponents, but we must not sink to their level.

App: The Christian life is a battle, a continual fight. We know that ultimately, Christ will give us the victory. But we won't achieve permanent victory on this side of heaven. The earthly life of the Christian requires that we fight the good fight continually.

The easiest thing to do is to quit, to throw in the towel, to give up. The most difficult part of the fight is when we resist the world, the flesh, and the devil. Life is much easier if we simply give in. But we can't do that; we must fight on; having done all that we can, we must withstand the enemy.

So in 2022, we must engage in this fight. We don't want to capitulate, compromise, or quit. We don't need to go out looking for a fight, but where it is appropriate to fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil, we should be engaged in that great struggle.

I trust you are engaged in the Christian fight. I trust you are taking a stand for righteousness and standing against our spiritual enemies. When you take a stand for righteousness, you become a target. But that's part of the Christian life, and we should not try to avoid the battle.

Lyrics: "must I be carried to the sky on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the fight and sailed through bloody seas? No I must fight if I would reign..."

II. Finish the course.

A. The word “course” (δρόμος) refers to a journey or a race course. Your way in life is your course. The work that God gives you to do is your course. God’s expectation for you is your course in life.

B. Paul uses the same word in Acts 20:24

*But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might **finish my course** with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.*

C. Paul’s “course” in life was the work of the Gospel ministry. His work was that of an apostle or missionary. As Paul sat in the dungeon, he knew that he was coming to the end of his course. He was facing his final days; he was anticipating crossing the finish line shortly.

D. Everyone has a different course to run. God gives us a vocation/calling in life, and he expects us to fulfill our responsibilities faithfully. For our purposes, your “course” amounts to your spiritual/Christian responsibilities. Your course in life is how you serve God.

E. To finish the course is to come to the end of the journey or the race successfully. Finishing your course is persisting in the race until the end. It’s not giving up until the race is over—when you’ve crossed the finish line.

F. How do we run the Christian race?

1 Cor 9:24-27 tells us how to run the race.

1. .24 Run to obtain the prize—i.e., run to win. Those who win races are usually the ones who worked the hardest and were the best prepared. They take the race seriously and they enter the race with the expectation of winning, or at least of finishing.

2. .25 Run with self-control/discipline in all things—be “temperate.” Cf. vs. 27 “I keep under my body...” You can’t indulge you every bodily desire if you want to run your best race.

3. .26 Run with purpose—“not uncertainly.” The Christian runner must know his purpose and goal—to glorify God and serve God’s people.

4. .27 Run according to the rules. Paul says that he does not want to be disqualified (“a castaway”). Running the Christian race means living according to the rules that Jesus established for us.
5. Run with patience. The AH speaks of putting off the things that slow us down and running the race with patience as we look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Heb 12:2-3). The Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint.
6. Run to the end; finish the course.

Illus.: The Japanese runner Shizo Kanakuri holds the world record for the slowest time in the Olympic marathon. He finished the race after 54 years, eight months, six days, 5 hours and 32 minutes. He began the race during the 1912 Olympic games in Stockholm, Sweden. But partway through the race, he became overheated and collapsed. Race officials listed him as missing in the official records of the race. 54 years later, in 1967, Olympic authorities invited him to return to Sweden and finish the race, which he did, at 75 years of age. After crossing the finish line, he said, “It was a long trip. Along the way, I got married, had six children and ten grandchildren.”

Our course in life is a long trip. Many of us will get married and have children and grandchildren during this race. But we must stay in the race, stay on course, and eventually finish the race God gave us to run. That’s what it means to be faithful.

- G. The danger is that some don’t remain on course. They get off the race track in one way or another.
 1. Some people become disqualified (“castaway”). Some aspects of Christian ministry require certain qualifications, and if you don’t maintain those qualifications, you are no longer able to serve.
 2. Some Christians backslide. They stop running the race. They quit for a while. They slow down or stop or even go backwards. E.g., the Prodigal Son.
 3. Unfortunately, some quit the race altogether. That is, they give up on the Christian faith. Paul mentions several people who gave up on the Christian race and forsook the faith altogether.

What is true of those who permanently quit the Christian course? It's an evidence that they never belonged on the race course to begin with; they were never genuine believers.

4. One of the marks of a genuine believer is that he finishes his course. He may not be the fastest or the most graceful runner; he may stumble and have various setbacks and failures; but he keeps on going to the end, like the tortoise in the fable.

App: What is your course for the new year? Will you stay on the right course? Will you get off course or maybe quit running the Christian race? Maybe you'll go in the wrong direction.

Our goal for this new year should be to stay on track, keep on the right course. The Christian life is like a marathon. God expects us to keep running the race until we cross the finish line.

Athletes sometimes encourage one another to "leave it all on the field." Sometimes marathon runners collapse as soon as they cross the finish line. They've used up all their energy in the race. That ought to be our goal as well, to fight the good fight and stay on course right up to the end of our lives.

III. Keep the faith.

A. Paul says, "I have kept the faith."

1. The word "keep" (τηρέω) means "preserve, guard, hold fast."
2. To "keep" the faith is to continue to hold on to it, it is to be faithful.

B. Paul was saved on the road to Damascus or shortly thereafter, and he kept the faith through the rest of his life. Despite all the hardships and persecutions he endured, he never lost his faith in Jesus.

C. The word "perseverance" describes this keeping of the faith. True believers persevere in two areas/realms:

1. They persevere in "the faith."
 - a) "**The** faith" is a specific thing. It's not just any kind of faith. It's not just a nebulous, vague sort of belief.
 - b) "The faith" describes the basic teachings of the Christian faith. Jude exhorts us to contend earnestly for the faith once given to the saints.

- c) “The faith” is the central teachings of the Christian faith—that Jesus is the Son of God who lived a perfect life, died on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice for our sin, and rose again. Those who repent of sin and believe in Jesus will be forgiven of sin, declared righteous, and granted a home in heaven. That’s “the faith.”

It’s unfortunate that many professing Christians are not able to define what “the faith” is. They don’t even know what the fundamental, primary teachings of the faith that they claim to possess is. Many could not even give a clear or accurate presentation of the Gospel.

- d) Many people today claim to be Christians, but their belief and practice is outside the boundaries of NT Christianity. They do not believe or practice “the faith” as given by Jesus and the apostles. They have “faith” but not “the faith once for all delivered to the saints.”
- e) Keeping “the faith” means that you’ve retained your belief in and commitment to Jesus. You’ve maintained the Christian faith as taught in the NT. You’ve remained within the boundaries of genuine, NT Christian faith.

Illus.: When I talk to cultists, I try to show them that they are outside the boundaries of the Christian faith even though they claim to be Christians. You can’t be a Christian if you deny certain fundamental teachings of the Christian faith. “The faith” has boundaries.

2Jo 1:9 Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. ...

- f) If you fail to keep the faith, then your Christianity is questionable at best and most likely not genuine.
2. They persevere in good works.
- a) We know that we are not saved by good works, but good works are a necessary part of the Christian life.
- b) Remember what James tells us: “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:17, 20). We display our faith through our good works.

- c) If there is no evidence of Christian living, then there is no evidence of genuine faith.
 - d) Remember what Jesus said in Mt 7:22f. Just because someone claims to have faith in Jesus does not mean that he is a genuine believer. 1 John 2:3-5 talks about those who claim to be saved but live in habitual, unrepentant disobedience. They are not saved; they are liars.
 - e) Likewise, Paul's letter to Titus talks about those who profess to know God but in works they deny it (Titus 1:15-16). Their wicked lifestyle shows that their faith is insincere. Evil works contradict a profession of faith.
 - f) Someone said, "We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone." Faith always proves itself through good works. Genuine believers maintain godly Christian behavior.
 - g) Jesus said that a good tree brings forth good fruit. If the fruit is bad, then the tree is bad—"you shall know them by their fruit."
 - h) If the good works are not there, then the faith is most likely not there either.
- D. So keeping the faith is more than just saying that you believe in Jesus. Keeping the faith requires remaining within the boundaries of biblical, orthodox Christianity and living the kind of lifestyle that is consistent with the teachings of the NT. If you are not doing that, you are not keeping the faith.

App: As we think about the new year, our goal should be to keep the faith. In spite of opposition, ridicule, and even persecution, genuine believers maintain their faith and good works. They persevere in the faith. Those who are genuine followers of Jesus demonstrate that fact through their works.

Maybe there is someone here today who does not have "the faith." That is, you've never been saved. The best thing you could do to make this a great year is to get saved—repentance and faith.

2Ti 4:8 *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 unto all them also that love his appearing.*

If we fight the good fight, finish the course, and keep the faith, we can be confident that God will reward us. He is the righteous judge. Great rewards await those who persist in the Christian race.

Our challenge for the new year is to fight the good fight, continue on our course, and keep the faith. Do we do all of that through our own strength, simply through self-determination and will power? Do we succeed through pure grit and stamina? No.

The AH tells us that we must look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of the faith. This is the good fight “of faith,” so faith is the key.

Paul tells us that we can do all things through Christ. We trust that God is working in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Phil 2:12). We work at this, but we also trust that God is working in us to help us fight the good fight, stay on course, and keep the faith.

We don't know what may befall us in 2022. For some of us, like Paul, we may finish our course this year. Some of us may face persecution and opposition like Paul did. We may be tempted to quit or to sit on the side lines. We may be tempted to quit fighting and just give up. But quitting is not an option for the Christian. Our goals for 2022 should be that we *fight* the good fight, *finish* the course God has for us, and *defend* the faith. That's a biblical and practical set of resolutions we can put into practice this year.