

Run to Win!**by Dwain N. Esmond****Associate Director, Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.**

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7-8, NKJV).

INTRODUCTION

Personal preparation for the Second Advent of Jesus Christ is one of the major themes in Ellen White’s writings. One author comments, “The reality of the nearness of the second advent of Christ dominated Ellen White’s life and shaped her writing career. Christ’s return is seen as the climax of salvation, signaling the beginning of the end of the great controversy between good and evil, a supreme expression of God’s love, the point of the three angels’ messages, an incentive for living the Christian life, and demanding an urgency in preaching the gospel message to all the world in as short a time as possible.”¹

One need only look at the events overtaking our world to conclude that the Second Coming of Jesus is even at the door. Prophecy seems to be fulfilling at a pace not seen in the history of planet earth. Given this reality—the impending culmination of the Christian race—what manner of people ought we to be? On this point the Apostle Paul’s experience and counsel offer us salient advice as we prepare for the soon return of Jesus. But before we get to Paul, allow me to tell you about an amazing athlete.

The Perfect Human. That is what WIRED.com dubbed him in its much-read January 2007 article on Dean Karnazes.² The name Dean Karnazes (pronounced car-NAH-sis) means

¹ Condensed and adapted from George R. Knight. *Meeting Ellen White* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2001), 109-127.

² Joshua Davis, “The Perfect Human,” *Wired*, January 1, 2007, <http://www.wired.com/2007/01/ultraman/>.

precious little to 99.9 percent of the world's population, but to the sliver of rare humans who run ultramarathons, Karnazes is a hero with legions of followers. How did he get this way? The answer is quite simple: He ran, and ran, and then ran some more.

Karnazes has pushed the limits, even in his youth. At age 12, for instance, he hiked from one side of a huge canyon to the other—a distance of some 18 miles (29 kilometers). But this feat is not what has endeared him to hard-nosed ultramarathoners; it is the extreme distances that he runs.

Ultramarathon runners run distances in excess 42 Kilometers (26.2 miles), the classic marathon distance. To put it in perspective, Karnazes once ran 560 Kilometers (350 miles) in 80 hours and 44 minutes without sleep. He completed a race called “The Relay” on 11 separate occasions, while running alone. The 199-mile (320.3 kilometer) run is supposed to be a team event. As amazing as those feats are, it was the 2006 Endurance 50 that garnered Karnazes worldwide fame. This ultra-athlete ran 50 marathons in 50 days.

EVERYONE RUNS

While most of us “regular” humans will never run a marathon, let alone an ultramarathon, it bears noting this morning that all human beings are in a race. We cannot choose whether or not we will run; we can only choose *how* we run.

There are few biblical characters who could understand the mindset of an ultramarathon runner, but if there was one, that person would be the Apostle Paul. First Century citizens of Asia Minor knew quite a bit about distance running. They celebrated both the Olympic and Isthmian Games, the latter being held near ancient Corinth in the year before and after the Olympic Games. Corinthian believers were athletic enthusiasts accustomed to watching feats of speed, agility, strength, and endurance—and Paul knew it. In an effort to “speak their language” and provoke them to a life of faithfulness to God, Paul likened the believer's spiritual life to a race. Paul urged the believers then to run to win! He would do the same today were he around.

“Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things” (1 Corinthians 9:25), he wrote, referring to those athletes that Corinthians were likely to see running through their town from day to day. “They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.” Paul quickly added. He wanted the believers to know that how they chose to run the race of life would have eternal consequences. Paul even shares his own “running” technique:

“Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air;” (verses 26-27). Notice, Paul does not run with “uncertainty,” unsure of why he’s in the race. He has a single-minded focus. He disciplines himself to win! “This race is worth winning!” Paul seems to say.

Over the course of his life, the Apostle internalized and employed this sporting motif when speaking about the Christian life. For instance, he picks up the language of the games when delivering his valedictory address to Timothy, his son in the faith. Sitting in a Roman dungeon with a death sentence hanging over his head, Paul knew that the end of his race was in sight. Nothing quite concentrates the mind like the specter of one’s impending demise. Though lonely (2 Timothy 4:9-22), Paul seemed to transcend the hurried pangs of death. “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come” (2 Timothy 4:6), he tells Timothy, in an effort urge him to speed up his visit to Rome.

Paul had been running his race for many years, and he wanted Timothy to know that through the power of God, he had won the race! Paul shared with his young friend the three accomplishments of which he was most pleased:

1. I HAVE FOUGHT A GOOD FIGHT (2 Timothy 4:7)! Paul chose the right fight to fight.

Paul’s first claim is no ordinary statement. After all, there are numerous “fights” in which we humans engage. Countless men and women bend their fleeting energies to climb the ladder of professional success. They depend on a mixture of intellectual acumen, educational preparation, innate ability, and dogged determination to “set them up for life.” For this they fight. For others the fight is the epicurean’s pursuit of unfettered pleasure—5-Star vacations, sexual conquests, delectable meals, etc. For these they fight!

In the face of these contests—and a thousand others like them—Paul says in effect, “Not only did I fight a good fight, but I chose the right fight to fight!” Ellen G. White wrote of Paul’s Christian choice: “Through his long term of service, Paul had never faltered in his allegiance to his Savior. Wherever he was—whether before scowling Pharisees, or Roman authorities; before the furious mob at Lystra, or the convicted sinners in the Macedonian dungeon; whether

reasoning with the panic-stricken sailors on the shipwrecked vessel, or standing alone before Nero to plead for his life—he had never been ashamed of the cause he was advocating.”³

It should not be lost on 21st Century Christians that Paul’s fight exacted a great toll on him. Ellen White wrote,

Paul knew that his warfare against evil would not end so long as life should last. Ever he realized the need of putting a strict guard upon himself, that earthly desires might not overcome spiritual zeal. With all his power he continued to strive against natural inclinations. Ever he kept before him the ideal to be attained, and this ideal he strove to reach by willing obedience to the law of God. His words, his practices, his passions—all were brought under the control of the Spirit of God.”⁴ The Apostle never stopped sharing the gospel, neither did he shirk his responsibility.

Which brings us to the second accomplishment of which Paul testified:

2. I HAVE FINISHED THE RACE (2 Timothy 4:7)! The race of life will exact a toll, but with God’s help, we can finish strong!

When questioned as to his bona fides as an Apostle of Christ, Paul said:

“From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. 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; 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; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness” (2 Corinthians 11:24-27, NKJV).

Why did Paul not give up? He wanted to finish the race! He wanted to win!

Here again the Servant of the Lord offers great insight:

It was this single-hearted purpose to win the race for eternal life that Paul longed to see revealed in the lives of the Corinthian believers. He knew that in order to reach Christ’s ideal for them, they had before them a life struggle from which there would be no release. He entreated them to strive lawfully, day by day seeking for piety and moral excellence. He pleaded with them to lay aside every weight and to press forward to the goal of perfection in Christ.”⁵

Paul knew that running the Christian race offered a better prize than the games of His day. “The competitors in the ancient games,” wrote Ellen White, “after they had submitted to

³ Ellen G. White. *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nampa: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), p. 500.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 314-315.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 315.

self-denial and rigid discipline, were not even then sure of the victory. ‘Know ye not,’ Paul asked, ‘that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize?’ However eagerly and earnestly the runners might strive, the prize could be awarded to but one. One hand only could grasp the coveted garland. . . . Such is not the case in the Christian warfare. Not one who complies with the conditions will be disappointed at the end of the race.”⁶

We must understand that the race of life will not be easy. Those who win are those who finish—not those who are swift or strong (Ecclesiastes 9:11). No one will finish unscathed, untouched, unharmed, or unmarked (2 Timothy 3:12). Those who follow Jesus Christ must be prepared to run through the heat of summer—persecution—and the blinding chill of winter—loneliness! We must never stop, no matter the cost!

While Paul had fought a good fight and finished his race, it was his third accomplishment that made the other two truly meaningful:

3. I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH (2 Timothy 4:7). To keep the faith entrusted to us, we must also share it.

When Paul accepted Christ’s call to share the good news of salvation with the people of his day, he knew he was in for a fight. By his own admission, Paul was “not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:16). This boldness put him on a collision course with the devil. But nothing could make him surrender his faith, or the mission to which he was called. “The one great purpose of his Christian life,” Ellen White wrote, “had been to serve Him whose name had once filled him with contempt; and from this purpose no opposition or persecution had been able to turn him aside. His faith, made strong by effort and pure by sacrifice, upheld and strengthened him.”⁷ The Apostle Paul was determined to keep—and share—the faith!

Paul accepted the personal claims of the gospel on his life. We see one such example when he, Silas, and a young inexperienced Timothy headed for Asia to preach the gospel. The Bible says they were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia” (Acts 16:6). Something wonderful happened instead. Paul received a vision in which a man from Macedonia pleaded, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Verse 9, NIV). The next morning God’s servant awoke and “immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them” (verse 10, NKJV).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 500.

Paul's heart was so surrendered to God that when He saw the appeal from Macedonia in vision, he accepted the call as binding upon him and his associates—no questions asked. Paul does not pass this responsibility off on his associates. In fact, they together accept the call to go and make disciples in Macedonia. The call for Paul, Silas, and Timothy was personal. Part of keeping the faith was accepting God's call to personally share the faith.

This keeping and sharing of the faith was something that Ellen G. White knew from personal experience. Asked by the church to go to Australia and establish God's work there, Ellen White stated in a letter to Elder O.A. Olsen, then President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "It was not the Lord who devised this matter. I could not get one ray of light to leave America."⁸ In spite of her apprehension, at age 64, Ellen White departed for a foreign field of ministry with William, her 37 year-old son. Upon her arrival in Australia she grew desperately ill. For 11 months Sister White suffered from malarial fever and inflammatory rheumatism. She wrote that "During this time she experienced 'the most terrible suffering' of her 'whole life,' but said that the suffering had nevertheless 'a cheerful side.'"⁹

What could be cheerful about such suffering? She wrote, "My Savior seemed to be close beside me. I felt His sacred presence in my heart, and I was thankful. These months of suffering were the happiest months of my life, because of the companionship of my Savior."¹⁰

This unwelcome turn in her ministry did not embitter Ellen White. Not only did she persevere in Australia—and New Zealand—but her work helped to establish education, health, and other ministries that remain to this day. Thousands of people have been led to Christ and trained for service by these ministries as a result of Sister White's willingness to sacrifice personally for the spread of the gospel.

We must do personal work for the salvation of others, if we too would keep the faith. In the book *Gospel Workers*, the Servant of the Lord wrote: "When personal work is neglected, many precious opportunities are lost, which, were they improved, would advance the work decidedly."¹¹ In 1897 she concluded, "If one half of the sermonizing were done, and double the

⁸ Ellen G. White to O.A. Olsen, Letter 127, 1896.

⁹ Jerry Moon and Denis Kaiser, "For Jesus and Scripture," in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, edited by Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹¹ Ellen G. White. *Gospel Workers* (Review and Herald, 1915), 364.

amount of personal labor given to souls in their homes and in the congregations, a result would be seen that would be surprising”¹²

Even as he faced the cessation of his life, Paul could look clear-eyed on his past and know beyond any doubt that he had “kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7, NKJV). Paul had accepted the faith, lived the faith, shared the faith, and fought for it. Perhaps this is why he could exclaim with certainty, “Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8, NKJV). An ultramarathon performer in the game of life, Paul could shout, “I won! I finished!” Wouldn’t you like that to be your testimony?

In *Ultramarathon Man: Confessions of An All-Night Runner*, Dean Karnazes writes: “I run because long after my footprints fade away, maybe I will have inspired a few to reject the easy path, hit the trails, put one foot in front of the other, and come to the same conclusion I did: I run because it always takes me where I want to go.”¹³

Running “takes me where I want to go,” said Karnezes. Karnazes’ statement begs the question, is our running for heaven taking us where we want to go, or are we running under the illusion that heaven is our goal when in fact it is not?

Ellen White comments:

The apostle adjured the Corinthians, ‘Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.’ Should they become boastful and self-confident, neglecting to watch and pray, they would fall into grievous sin, calling down upon themselves the wrath of God. Yet Paul would not have them yield to despondency or discouragement. He gave them the assurance: ‘God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that ye may be able to bear it. Paul urged his brethren to ask themselves what influence their words and deeds would have upon others and to do nothing, however innocent in itself, that would seem to sanction idolatry or offend the scruples of those who might be weak in the faith. ‘Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.’¹⁴

Paul understood that Christians in the race of life were being watched. He knew that onlookers and fellow runners were taking note of every runner’s commitment and “technique.”

¹² *Manuscript 139*, 1897, 8.

¹³ Dean Karnazes. *Ultramarathon Man: Confessions of An All-night Runner* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2006).

¹⁴ White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 316.

Not only are Christian runners being watched by earth's inhabitants; all of the heavenly unfallen world is watching us. In Hebrews 12:1 Paul captures this idea and offers some counsel on how to run to win. "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (NASB).

Did you get that? We must lay aside every weight and every besetting sin, anything that would break our stride or tire us out prematurely must be jettisoned. We must give God our very best effort and this requires that we put aside everything and anything that is unlike Him. This is the only way that we run to where want to go. If we surrender all to God and run with patient endurance the race that is set before us, we will testify with Paul that there is laid up in heaven a "crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8).

Let us keep running until Jesus comes again and we are able to live a life of unbroken fellowship with the One who ran with us every step of the way!

Unless otherwise noted, Scriptures quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.