

“Long-Distance Runner”
By General Pastor Peter F. Paine
Sunday, June 14th, 2015

Frank Libby, would you please raise your hand, stand up, and just let us welcome you, and tell you how much we love you. Frank, it's good to have you. Would you share with the congregation what you shared with me just at the beginning of service? Would you come up and just share how God has blessed you? It touched my heart, and I know it'll touch yours. And tell us what year you met Pastor Davis, if you would. I know it was the seventies, but I don't know exactly what year it was. But, when I met Frank, he looked a little different than he does today. Frank met Pastor Davis, and they had a great friendship, a great relationship, and it's led to a relationship that's eternal.

Frank: It's been a long road. I wasn't very much of a religious man. Actually, I was down on the strip in 1973; it seemed like everything I did was wrong, at least, going by everybody else. I ran a lot of jewelry stores back then. I ran a lot of other things that weren't very nice down there, too. And, then, this old fat man came up to me one day, and, I tell you what—whew!—he threw me right up against the wall. He said, “I'm going to put the fear of God in you, son. You think you're somebody? God's going to make you somebody.” Right on. God did.

I never had a whole lot. One thing I did have for several years was Pastor Davis. Whenever I'd start to side-step, he was there to pick me up and straighten me out, kick me in the butt.

I was there the first time Pastor Paine walked across the doggone tracks, right there on Sheridan Road and 22nd Street. I met the girls, and Mrs. Davis, and Pastor Davis walked me down for the first time. Didn't have no building; didn't need no building. That's one thing I learned: I don't need a building; if I need to talk to the Man, I talk to the Man.

To make a long story short, anyways, probably the most fantastic thing in my life was I always made out a list, after I met Pastor Davis. My list was, when I was over in Nam and came back, I didn't have any family back then. My daughter was gone; my wife divorced me when I was over in Nam. My grandma, the lady that raised me all my life, she passed on. My father didn't want me in the first place, so that was neither here nor there. But, for thirty-nine years—thirty-nine years!—I searched for my daughter. California, New York, everywhere I went in the jewelry business, I searched. I had a very, very good friend—you met him a few times—his name was Clarence Cool. He was a salesman that I trained. I'm not too much into computers, I mean, I've still got a flip phone. Anyway, he got on my computer, and he said, “I'll hook you up on Facebook. So, I'm searching one day, and it says, “Friends, relatives,” real big box. Been around the world three times looking for her, hired private detectives. The state of California wouldn't help none. So I said, “Why not?” I hit that button—bam!—there she was, three seconds later. Somebody I've looked for, for thirty-nine years, and there she was. That was all God. It didn't have anything to do with the computer or anything else. Well, about five seconds later, the mom decided to block me out. Well, I never had much of a chance. So, I wasn't going to get a chance to see my daughter, or talk to my daughter until her issues were solved. I thought her issues were solved when she divorced me while I was in Nam. Anyway, my daughter wasn't stupid. She went through drugs, she went through alcohol, she went through everything. She ditched her mom, and hitch-hiked from Maine to California. Anyway, I get a message, on my E-mail address, not Facebook, “I don't know who you are. I don't know where you are, but I don't care where you are. My dad's been dead for years. He died in Nam.” Well, there was a movie that came out called, “Dead Man Walking,” So, I told her, by E-mail, “When you're ready, when God's presence is there for you, if you want to meet me, if you have any questions for me, if

there's anything you want to know about me, this is my name, this is my number, this is my business number, this is my phone number. Everything you need to know is there.

To make a long story short, March of 2011, I finally met my daughter for the first time. And I'm a grandpa! That's God's work, there! Totally awesome stuff, that's Jesus looking out for me, a lost soul that Pastor Davis saved. That's when I got baptized my second time. The first time was by Pastor Davis, the second time was by Pastor Paine. And in October, I just married my daughter away. That was the last thing on my list that I wanted.

I've only got so much time, but I want to thank somebody that's been very, very good to me, from the strip, to Christian Fellowship Church on Belvidere Road, (turning to Pastor Paine) my brother, I love you, and God bless you.

Pastor Paine: When I was here, not too long ago, I had the privilege to take a little journey with you through the scriptures; we talked about David and his six-hundred men, and how that they went to get their families, and God restored them. I love how God works. I love how He deals with us, and how He works with us. I am fed, I am full to the tippy-top. But, I have a message that God's laid on my heart; I don't think it's going to take too long to preach, because I think we've already had so much. But I do have some things that I need to share with you today, and the title of the message would be Long-distance Runner.

When I was in high school, I wanted to be on the swim team real bad. I tried out for the event that I thought that I would be best in, which was fifty yard Freestyle, and I didn't make the team. So, I tried out for the fifty-yard butterfly, and I didn't make the team. It was real simple when I was in high school on the team; the top three—more people could try out if you wanted to, but the top three times made the cut, so it was real simple. You didn't have to wait to read your name on a list; right after you tried out for an event, you knew if you made the team; the top three times made the team. They would run all the events. And I tried out for every single event, and I didn't make the team, until the last event, which was 400-yard freestyle, which was sixteen laps in the pool. So I had tried out, so I had swam, every single event. And the coach kept saying to me, "Are you sure?" because most people tried out for one event. I tried out for every event. And this was the last one of the day, and then the cuts were over; you were either on the team, or you weren't. And I was the third spot, and I made the team in the 400-yard freestyle. What I learned about myself that I hadn't known before was that I was never fast, but I could set a pace and keep it. And I think that's probably the hallmark of my Christian ministry is that I've never been all that brilliant, I've never done anything all that amazing, but I just didn't quit. Just set a pace and kept it, and stayed in the race. So, I know I'm talking to people who are in different places in your journey of life today. But, I hope that you'll take something from this message, Long-distance Runner, and apply it to your life, that the race is not to the swift, but to those who don't quit.

I heard a speaker say once, "How many in the audience would like to have a perfect past?" and I thought to myself, "Well, that's a ridiculous question, because it's impossible." The Bible says, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Can the church say amen? And, if you're not a sinner, you're a liar, and that's a sin, so... I think we're all covered; all right? He said, "How many would like to have a perfect past?" I thought, "Sign me up." I was skeptical at first, but I wanted to hear what this man had to say. He said, "So, you live today, and you do everything that God has for you to do," and he went down the list, and talked about how we can bring every thought into captivity, and so on, and so on, and so on, and so on. I thought, "I could do that," and he said, "You've got one day of a perfect past. And then you do it again tomorrow." And he put it together very well, but the short version is, he said, "And then you'll have two days of a perfect past." And he said, "You know, at the end of that first month of a perfect past." I thought to myself, "Well, that's impossible, because none of us are perfect, even those who start today." But it was a very profound point, and it stuck with me, and I realized that, when the devil tells me about what happened last week, last month, last year, when I was fifteen, when I was

twenty, whatever—those things I wish I hadn't done... Some of you are still haunted—I'm going to say it again—some of you are still haunted by mistakes of the past. You're embarrassed; you're afraid someone will find out. Some of you are still angry about mistakes that others have made that have affected your life. I'm not making light of them; I wouldn't do that to your story. But, here's what you shouldn't do to your story: Leave out the part where God comes up and says, "I've got a plan," where God shows up and says, "I can help you through this."

In Genesis, the first chapter, God's creating the Heavens and the earth. He made man out of the dust of the earth. It's all good. He sees that man's alone, and that's not good, so He takes a rib from man and creates the woman. Adam gets to name all the creatures, all the fowls of the air, and all the beasts of the field. Then he gets to name the woman that God made out of the rib of Adam, and then they're placed in this garden, this beautiful place, and they're told, "You can eat anything from this place, except the fruit from this one tree." Why would they make a decision to do that? And the answer is, because they're human. Well, we could get into, "Well, she was really to blame," or we could get into, "Well, Eve' really to blame because he let Eve," But the serpent really beguiled them both, and they chose evil, because they chose to disobey God. And we, as the human race, still pay the consequences of that today.

I want to talk to you about being a long-distance runner today. I want to talk to you about finishing well, today. I want to talk to you about the fact that, even if there are still consequences to a decision that you made years ago, we know a God that can save; we know a God that can forgive. We know a God who is able. We know a God who has prepared a place for us; He said that if it were not so, He would not have told us. Heaven is as real as the chair that you're sitting on. I could preach a whole sermon on the qualities of Heaven. I tell you that I long to go to heaven. I tell you that I look forward to going to Heaven. But, between now and then, I look forward to telling everyone I can that there's a God who still can save, that there's a God who's very able. So, Adam and Eve made a mistake, they paid the price for it; we're paying the price for it, and we could fold our arms and say, "Woe is me!"

I'm going to talk about the consequences of sin for a few minutes today, because, if you're going to be a long-distance runner, if you're going to finish well, you need to understand that sin is going to happen. It's either going to happen at your own hands, or someone is going to sin, and it's going to affect your life. It's something that we're going to have to accept if we're going to finish well. And I have to tell you that, if you took this message and stopped right there, it would be a pretty dismal picture. That would be a pretty ugly pain, wouldn't it? "Oh, so Pastor Paine told me, 'Sin's going to happen, and it's going to be bad, and you may as well just brace up for the storm, because that's the way it is.'" But, that's not the end of the story. The end of the story is that we can learn from our mistakes, and be forgiven, and go on.

In Acts, the fifth chapter, we read about Ananias and Sapphira, and they made a bad decision. They made a very bad decision. We could all unpack it; we could spend a lot of time to try to figure out what it was; we could talk about pride, or we could talk about the self-sufficiency attitude, that they needed to protect something... Jim shared about that in his testimony today. We just had to trust God, and God provided. If they had trusted God, God would have provided for Ananias and Sapphira, but they lied to the Holy Ghost, the Scripture says, and read about it in Acts the fifth chapter. It's a story of when we take things into our own hands; it's a story of when, "I think I've got a better plan than God has." None of us, on our face, none of would use those words, "I've got a better plan than God," and, yet, with our actions, we can say it very day of our lives. "I've got a better plan than you, God. I know how I can do this, and, if I get in trouble, I'll call you." "If I get in trouble, I'll call you." Every one who's raised a child through their teen-age years, knows that there will come a time when your child will say, "I got this. I don't need your help," and you know they don't have it, and they do need your help. But, the reality is that that's part of human nature. I have my own theory on that: I think it's something that God built into teen-agers so that they won't stay at home forever. "I got this; I can handle it, mom," and mom and dad get real stupid for about ten or twelve years, and then, if the children live long enough, and the parents

live long enough to see it—I used to tell all three of our children, “I’m going to live long enough that I’m smart again. I’m going to survive this time in your life when I’m too dumb to know anything.” And I have. I have; all three of our children said, “What happened to Dad? He was dumb for a lot of years; he couldn’t come in out of the rain. The man didn’t know a thing!” Okay, so there’s a little laugh at my expense, but sometimes we’re like that with God. Sometimes we, as children of God, are like that, “God, I got this. I’ve got a plan; I don’t need Your input right now. I can break this all by myself, thank You.”

In Isaiah fifty-nine, the prophet tells us that sin separates. He tells us that our iniquities have separated us from God. There comes a place that God has to turn His back on our decision. There comes a place where God has to say, “I can’t be a part of this.” There comes a place—and we can do it to ourselves—and it’s a very powerful concept. You know the scripture says that He will never leave us nor forsake us, but He will allow us to create an environment where He can no longer be with us, and that’s not Him leaving us, that’s us leaving Him. Sin separates, and you’ve got to know that. Because, as I talk to you today about being a long-distance runner, when you are separated from God, you got to go and check the mirror, and say, “What have I done to create this situation?” And I’m going to speak to one person today—I don’t know who; maybe one person, maybe several of you—when you feel like the sin is too big to forgive, get on your knees in a hurry. If you get between God and doing that part of your business, your homework, you’ll mess up God’s plan until you get over it. Some people have wasted years of their lives. I know I’m not preaching evangelistic today, but there’s meat on these bones if you’ll take it. You can waste years of your life in a state of unforgiveness. Don’t do it. If you want to be a long-distance runner, if you want to finish well, get the forgiveness thing down, and understand that the best thing you can do—watch this—the best thing you can do for yourself, when it’s time to forgive, is to get on with it. The best thing you can do for yourself—I’ll say it again—the best thing you can do for yourself, when it’s time to forgive, is to get on with it. I’ve wasted a lot of time in my life; you’re listening to a guy that has admitted to you that I have wasted a lot of my time thinking, “Well, I’ll forgive when I’m ready, but, right now, I want a pound of flesh.” I wish that wasn’t true; I wish it wasn’t part of my testimony, and I’d like to think it’s a small part, but the truth is, many days I wasted doing that were bad days. They don’t have to be a part of your journey, and I’ll tell you, you don’t know how much longer you’ve got before that sin will separate you from God, because you cannot yield.

Let me preach a little more. In Matthew, the fourth chapter, Jesus talks to us about temptation, and how to deal with it. I’m going to spend a little time with you, today, church. If you want to be a long-distance runner, you need to take Matthew chapter 4 and study it, digest it, get to know it and understand it. It’s interesting that what happened in Matthew chapter 3 was that Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan. Jesus didn’t need to be baptized for salvation; He’s our Lord and savior. He did it as our example. He did it as our example. And, after His baptism in Matthew three, in Matthew four He’s tempted. Isn’t interesting that he’s tempted right after He does what He’s illustrating for us to do, what is part of our Christian foundation, being buried with Him in baptism, raised to walk in newness of life. And so, He gets baptized, and the He gets tempted. How does He deal with temptation? You can boil it down to this phrase: **“Get thee behind me, Satan.”** When you’re tempted, when you’re not drawn to God’s will, when you’re not drawn to God’s plans, when you’re not drawn to how God wants to deal with your situation; when that temptation is in your life to take things into your own hands instead of letting God take care of the situation, go to Matthew four and find out how Jesus taught us to deal with temptation. It really boils down to this: Call on the name of Jesus. You have power in the name of Jesus. You have power in the name of Jesus. Amen? There’s power in that name, and you can use it for His glory. When you’re tempted, say the name of Jesus. Say it out loud if you have to. Get thee behind me, Satan. And if you are going to be a long-distance runner, you’re going to have to get good at calling on Jesus. Calling on Jesus when your mind strays, when your thoughts stray... I’m doing a study, and I’m not going to be able to preach on it today, maybe when I come back I’ll get a chance, on how that sin sneaks up on us. I’ll call it, “Sin just is a very subtle thing.” Most people don’t fail, most people don’t fall out of love with God all

at once. It usually happens a little at a time. A little at a time, we start looking where we shouldn't look. Thinking what we shouldn't think. Reading what we shouldn't read. Allowing ourselves to get pleasure where we shouldn't get pleasure. The Bible is very clear; it says sin for a season seems pleasurable. Sin for a season seems pleasurable. I'll say it this way: Sin for a season *is* pleasurable. That's why Satan uses it the way he does. But it's not pleasurable in terms of your relationship with God. We have to find that, when sin comes, when we are tempted, we turn to God, right then. We call on the name of Jesus, right now. We call out, and we say, "Lord, I need You in my life, right now; You are bigger than this." We need to stop telling God how big our problems are, and start telling our problems how big our God is. God's bigger than any problem you've got. God's bigger than any challenge you've got. God's bigger than any adversity that you're facing. Amen?

I'm talking to people today, and some of you are on a mountaintop experience—life is great. Some of you are in the valley today. The valley's where we learn. The mountaintop is where we celebrate what we learned. And, if you're in the valley, today, I tell you that God's available. He's as close as the whisper of His name. He's as close as the whisper of His name. Remember that. He can change your perspective in a second. He can give you a whole new way of looking at things. In second Corinthians, the twelfth chapter, starting at verse seven, and following through until the end of the story, Paul gives a whole talk about his thorn in the flesh. He starts off by saying, "Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of revelations..." When Paul talks about—and I want to just sort of tell you the story rather than read the Scriptures, but, if you're taking notes, write 2 Corinthians 12:7 and following. Somebody can shout out where that hole things ends, where he says, "...therefore will I glory in my infirmities..." "...when I am weak, then am I strong." Verse 10. So write seven through ten. So, what Paul is telling us in those verses is this: Look, something happened, and it was a horrible thing that was happening. It's still happening, but, because I allowed God, because I allowed God to speak to me, and it didn't happen initially, it didn't happen right away, but, because, ultimately, I allowed God to speak to me about this situation, I now know that I now know that what I thought was a bad thing was really a good thing, because God knows me better than I know me.

I want you to say with me, if you will—and I'm going to say it first, and then ask you to repeat it with me—God knows me better than I know me. Now let's say it together: God knows me better than I know me. That might have sounded a little childish, almost first-gradish, but think about it for a minute. We're going to say it again in just a moment, but think about what you just said. Think about how powerful that is: God knows me better than I know me. If you'll just take that and embrace it; take a moment for that to digest, think about the reality of that. Don't just hear it, but really think about it. Wow! God knows me better than I know me. He knows what's going to work better than I know what's going to work. He knows what's going to make this right, better than I do. It doesn't mean you're—I'm not putting you down! I'm just simply saying, if we don't draw on that resource, if we don't draw on that reality, that God knows better than I. Why? Why would you do that? If you were in a spelling bee, and you were allowed to look at your dictionary, and a word was asked, and you weren't sure how to spell it, would you look or would you not? Say there's a million dollar prize, I'd say, "Excuse me while I look it up." Right? That would be an I.Q. test more than a spelling bee. Do you think you're smarter than the dictionary? And I said that to be a little humorous, to make the point that we have a God that's available. And sometimes we say, "I'll go it alone, God." Why?

So Paul starts out by saying, "Lest I be exalted above measure, there was a messenger of Satan to buffet me." Do you realize that this is Apostle Paul saying, "I had this bad situation in my life," in fact, he still had this bad situation in his life, and it's a good thing. And the reason it's a good thing is because Paul had done so much for the glory of God, that Paul's personality was such, that if God didn't keep him in check—hello?—if God didn't keep him in check, he would start thinking too highly of himself, and then he would think, "I'm great Apostle Paul!" but what he learned was, "I need to say, I serve the great God Almighty." So, he goes on to say, "There as a thorn in the flesh. I sought the Lord thrice for this. Three

times I went to the Lord.” Three times he must have laid on his face and cried out to God. I can’t imagine the dialog that must have taken place. “God! I’m out here on the front lines, and You’re letting this thing continue to beat me down. Where are You, God?” And when Paul finally heard from God, God said, “I’m right here, and I’ve been with you always, but, Paul, right now you need this because it’s going to give you the perspective—” watch! “—it’s going to give you the perspective to see what I’m trying to do here. I want to keep you useful, Paul,” is what God was saying. And maybe what you’re going through right now is because of what we talked about in Isaiah fifty-nine, sin separates, or maybe it’s because God wants to keep you useful. I’m going to say something that’s going to sound very challenging for some of you, because your personalities are such that what I’m about to say could really go against the grain, here, but I’m saying because I want to help you today, those of you who choose to be a long-distance runner, I want to help you have the tools to do it. Are you ready? Show of hands: How many of you want to be useful for the glory of God today? Almost every hand in the room is up right now. That’s awesome! You want to be useful; well, how many of you want to be used? Well, that has a whole different—right? “I don’t want to be used.” But, if—watch—if you’re going to be useful for God, you’re going to have to let him use you. See, in our vernacular in our society today, that is a real negative word. We say to someone, “You’re not going to use me,” and I get that. And I don’t want to be used in the context of a negative thing. But, if God’s using you, it’s in the context of a positive thing. If you’re not clear on what I’m trying to say, let me just pull an illustration to try to help a little bit: What was the conversation like that took place in the Heavens when Job was being considered. God says, “Have you considered my servant, Job?” And He tells Satan about this great man, “Man, he prays, he loves his family, he’s seeking me, and he won’t deny me. He’s going to serve me,” and Satan says, “Only because You’ve blessed him so much; only because You’ve given him such a wonderful family, and all the stuff that You’ve given him. He’s a rich man, and You’ve put this hedge of protection around him.” And God says, “No, that’s not why. He loves Me in his heart, no matter what.” And Satan says—I’m paraphrasing, obviously; it’s in the Book of Job—and, so, Satan says, “Well, can I give this thing a test?” and God says, “Yeah, anything but his health.” Satan does; oh, man, he put Job through the wringer. Now, if I were Job, I’d be saying, “Hey, God, how did I qualify for this job? Huh? Really? Let Parrish do it. I think Parrish will handle it well. I really do. What did I do to deserve this, God?”

Somebody needs to hear that today, because, you know what? we look at snapshots of our life—and I get that, remember, I’m human, too. I’m in the same boat with you; I have the human condition you do—but then we have to say, “God, you see the big picture. You see the end from the beginning, and all I see is today.” I don’t know what tomorrow’s going to bring, but I know who’s going to bring tomorrow. Amen? And, so, if we’re going to be a long-distance runner, we have to allow God to be God in our lives, and, on the days when nothing makes sense, on the days when you’re getting the short end of the stick, on the days when nothing’s going right, on the days when the person who loved you says, “I don’t love you anymore,” on the days when the company you’ve worked for and sweat bullets for says they don’t need you any more, on the days that whatever could go wrong went wrong, Murphey looks like an amateur compared to what’s happened to you today, God is still God, and He knows what we need.

So, Paul ends this discourse in Second Corinthians by saying, “Therefore rather will I glory in my infirmities.” If you’re going to be a long-distance runner, you need to learn how to glory in your infirmities, to say, “You know what? this is a bad day, but it’s time for me to show it what I’m made of. I’ve got God in my life. It’s a bad day? Well, I’m going to show what I’m made of. I’m a man or God.” “I’m a woman for God.” “I’m a teenager for God.” Amen.

Let’s go to Philippians 4:13; we’ll spend a little time there. I’m going to do something that is not a recommendation for every time you study Scripture. But, I have learned that, occasionally, for some illumination of taking a chapter or section of Scripture and working it from the back to the front. Now, I would never recommend starting that way; you want to read it through, but, sometimes when you unpack it from the back to the front, you see things differently, you see things in a different light. I want to do

that with Philippians chapter four right now, and I'm going to start with verse thirteen, and I'm going to work back to verse eight. So, if you're taking notes, if you'll remember it, just write Philippians 4:13-8. Okay, here we go: He said in verse thirteen—this is Apostle Paul speaking to the church in Philippi—and he said, he said these words: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Now that's a good deal, huh? How many would sign up for that? Put me in that group, put me in that class, put me in the, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me group. That's when, let's say, we get out of the baptismal tank, we dry off, we get dressed, and we're looking for the line to get into: discouraged and defeated; no, put me in this line here: I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. Yeah, put my name down there; that's the one I want. How many of us, put me in that I can do all things through Christ line? "Oh, man, put me on the first string. I want to catch every ball; I want to make every home run. I want to make every touch down. I want to be the champion." I want to be in that group. I can do all things through Christ. How many of us? Let's just put our hands together. Sign me up. Yeah, I want to be in that group. Let's be in the "All things through Christ group." But, before we get there, we've first got—he said, in verse twelve, he says, "I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound..." In other words, he said, "I know how to have little. I know how to be put down. I know how to be disgraced. I know how to have people not recognize my apostleship. I know how to have people misunderstand me. I know how to be put in prison when I didn't commit a crime." He said, "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need." (Philippians 4:12) Now, how many want to get in that line? Let's get in the line where we want to be abased, where we want to be hungry... No, put me in the line where I'm going to take every other word in this Scripture. I want to be blessed, I want to be full; right? He said in verse eleven, "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." (Philippians 4:11) I've learned to be content when the paycheck doesn't come through, I've learned to be content when the bills aren't paid, I've learned to be content when my health isn't right, I've learned to be content when... Right? If you're going to be a long-distance runner, there's a lesson in this. I'm going to make a powerful point in a moment, about the fact that—well, I'll do it right now: The fact that the only way he can say what he said in verse thirteen, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me..." is because he's gone through this course. That was part of his long-distance running. Verse ten says, "But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity." He's talking about, "I know there were times when you wanted to help me, but you couldn't help me, but now you're helping me again, and I appreciate it." But, how did it feel when they couldn't help him? How did it feel when he needed the help from the church at Philippi, and they just didn't have it to give? They couldn't do what they wanted to do! They couldn't bless him the way they wanted to bless him, and he needed the blessing! And, in verse nine, he said, "Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do..." In other words, "I taught you, I showed you, I was your example. Do what I taught you to do! I've not only done it, I taught you how to do it." That's how he said, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Because Paul was a long-distance runner. Paul wanted to finish well. Paul didn't want to just have fifteen minutes of fame. Paul wasn't looking for a bright spot in his life. Paul wanted to hear, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord." Amen? And he said in verse eight, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever—" Listen to this; if you want to be a long-distance runner, take Philippians 4:8 and apply it to your life. Take Philippians 4:8 and put it somewhere where you can see it daily, until you have it committed to memory, and then keep it in your heart. If you want to be a long-distance runner, Philippians 4:8 has got to be your mantra. He said, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

I'm going to close today in the second chapter of Revelation. It's the Revelation of Jesus speaking to the church. In verse one through six, He's speaking to the church in Ephesus. I'm just going to paraphrase it, but, if you're taking notes, write Revelation two, verses one through six. He's speaking to the church in Ephesus, and He said, "Wow, you're a great church. You do what needs to be done. You hate sin, and you hate those who sin—" and 'hate' in this context means that you really don't tolerate sin. "You point it out, you call it out, so that purity can exist." He said, "But I have something against you." He said, "I have something against you," and, if you're going to be a long-distance runner, you're going to have to watch for this. If you're going to finish well, you're going to have to watch for this. He said, "You've left your first love. There was a time when I was all that mattered to you," the Lord says to this church. "There was a time when nothing else mattered. There was a time when you woke up thinking of me, and you went through the day thinking of me. When you were offered a promotion at work, your consideration was, 'How will this affect my ministry?' When there was a challenge in your family, you thought, 'What would God have me to do?' When somebody wronged you, you thought, "Lord, how would You have me to handle this situation?' There was time when I was your first love. There was a time when I was all that you thought about. There was time when you couldn't wait to get to church; you came early and you stayed late. There was time when the television couldn't hold your interest, because you wanted to study the Word. There was time when you invited everybody you met to a Bible study, or a worship service, or to listen to a Gospel story. There was time when you prayed for your co-workers. There was time when you would show up early at work, so that you could meet people as they came in, so you could find an opportunity to witness to them. There was time when you hung around the parking lot for a few minutes after church in case somebody needed to have a prayer. There was time when I was your first love, and no one else could get your attention; you would drive down the road, and those billboards couldn't capture your attention. You changed channels from that stuff that Satan has on the television to make you think lustful thoughts, and you just changed the channel without lingering there for another second. Come on, somebody knows what I'm talking about. There was a time when Satan would put that thought in your mind and you would immediately bring it into captivity, and say, "I love the Lord; I don't want to think those thoughts."

Left your first love; but it goes on to say that there's a remedy. I came today to tell you that, if you're going to be a long-distance runner, you're going to have to get this remedy, because, every once in a while, you're going to realize that you're a little bit like the church at Ephesus. Debbie and I talked today, and you were kind enough to acknowledge our anniversary; forty years—and I'm making my final point, here. I'm coming down to the wire. Preacher Howard, I'm on final approach, and I'm cleared for landing. You know, Preacher Howard taught me to fly. He had this beautiful Cessna airplane; we flew that all around the country, didn't we, Preacher? And, if you know anything about flying, you know that when you're on final, you're cleared for landing, that means there's nothing more to say to you, just bring the plane on in and touch down; you've got all the clearances you need to land. You've received your last instructions from the tower, and now all you've got to do is bring it in safe, and taxi off the runway. Preacher, I'm cleared for landing, and I won't take long, but I've got to say this before I touch down. If you're going to be a long-distance runner, you're going to realize, every once in a while, you've fallen out of love, for the moment. I started to say today Debbie and I celebrate our fortieth wedding anniversary. Forty years ago, she put this ring on my finger, and, yes, it's true, I've had it sized three times. It's a bigger ring than it was forty years ago. Ah, there's a lot of bigger things since then. If I were to be just blunt honest with you, there have been moments when I've had a thought in fear for our marriage. Anybody that's been married more than a couple of years would have to, somewhere, even if you don't say it out loud, say, "I know what you mean." Then I'd get back to my first love. Then I'd get my mind right, and I'd remember the covenant that I entered into when I said, "For richer, for poorer, for better or worse, forsaking all others, 'til death us do part." I said, "That's the one. That's the one I'm going home with. That's the one I'm crossing the finish line with. That's my dance partner. I'm going to dance with the one

I came with.” Amen? Is that how you feel with God? Is He your first love? And, if you’ve fallen out of love with Him today, you can fall back in, in the best way possible. If you’ve fallen out of love with Him today, it’s time to take His remedy. If you’ve fallen out of love, He’s said these words: “Repent,” that means turn from your wicked ways. Repent is godly sorrow and change. I could preach a whole message on repent; maybe one day I will. There’s a lot of meat on those bones; a lot to digest. I’ll just simply say this: Repent, and do that first work. Return to your first love, and do your first works over. Get back to God. Get back to God. I don’t know where you’re at in your journey; maybe you’re not crystal clear on it yourself. I’ve been there, too. But, I can tell you that you want to repent, and do your first works over. Do that as many times as you need to; you know God didn’t out a limit on it. Do that as many times as you need to. If you’re going to finish well, you’re going to have to learn to do that often. If you’ve fallen out of love with God—even for a second—repent and do your first works over. I’m so glad He didn’t leave us without remedy. I’m so glad he didn’t leave us without a plan. I’m so glad He didn’t leave us without the opportunity to fall back in love with Him again, and again, and again. Amen?

I need your help, because somebody needs this boost. Anybody here—hear what I’m saying before you raise your hand—anybody here brave enough to say, humble enough to say, bold enough to say, “I’ve fallen out of love with God since I’ve been a Christian, but I fell back in love with Him and He received me with open arms.” If you’ve fallen out of love with Him today, look around and see those hands, and say, Well, I’m in good company.” Because I know those of you have repented and done your first works over again. He, like in Luke fifteen, will receive you with open arms, because that’s what a Father does. So, will you be a long-distance runner with me? Will you make up your mind that you’re going to finish well? If you do, be glad you did, and, if I don’t see you again this side of Heaven, we’ll rejoice together on those streets of gold. I love you; God bless you; you’re dismissed.

