

Finishing Your Gun Lap

Enduring The End

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It was 1986 and Mr. Armstrong was 93 years of age. He was a remarkable man and still spoke in spite of his eyesight and halting step. I can remember him awkwardly walk to the stage but once on the stage, when he got behind the microphone, he became alive. It was really inspirational to watch him do this.

When we heard he was not doing well and then we heard he had died, I had to call the campus and ask the operator if it was true. It was, and we all sorrowed and we all wondered what is going to happen next. Someone once stated that he could not die and that God would never allow that. Of course they were wrong.

Joe Tkach was Mr. Armstrong's replacement, and he was guided by his son Joe Jr. and Mike Feazell, and slowly things began to change as well as the teaching. A small group of us made an agreement to fast on the first Monday of every month, and we did this for about a year.

It finally became evident that we would have to do something. Needless to say it was a very distressing time. The neighbors thought that I had a terminal disease because my face was so long, I could not help it, it was very sad.

I remember one sermon from a formerly faithful minister when he laughed and said how Mr. Armstrong had so many gun laps that he finally shot himself in the foot! When the sermon was over I tried to get to him to tell him what I thought, but there was a crowd around him telling him what a wonderful sermon he gave and how pleased they were about it. I did not get a chance to tell him what I thought. This man received a salary from Mr. Armstrong, and he had been taught things that he never knew before, yet he had the gall to stand up and laugh at him. I was angry.

John Ritenbaugh was going to try to find a welding job when several of us asked him if he would be our pastor. We all tithed months ahead as much as we could, because we had no office, no company car, no computers, no copier. This is the short version of how the Church of the Great God came to be.

Perhaps some of you would be pleased with the term gun lap. What Mr. Armstrong wanted to get across to each of us is that we are in a race, and it is not just any race, it is the most important race of our lives. The thing to realize is that it is important to us individually at this moment.

The term gun lap usually means the last lap of a mile race on a quarter mile track. When the runners finish three laps the official shot sounds to indicate that the last lap has started and the runners should give it all they have. One could say it is the most difficult part of any race. It would seem for us that the last lap warning has been sounded.

The world's record of a mile is three minutes thirteen seconds, roughly forty eight seconds a lap. The fastest I ever ran a mile was just under eight minutes, I am a slow poke. For us in the church, what is our gun lap? As I get older it takes me longer to walk a mile, roughly twenty to twenty five minutes. That is the best I can do.

For us I think one of the biggest gun laps we have ever had to face was the death of Mr. Armstrong. As things degenerated, how could we stay in the race? We wondered what we can do. We went to church every week, we prayed, we studied, we tithed, we offered, and kept the holy days, and we knew we would all go to the place of safety while we sit and watch the rest of the world dissolve while we were safe and sound. Our comfortable world had dissolved and to stay in the race we had to strain, pray, and struggle amidst being disfellowshipped, being lied to, having people calling us names. Our world had changed from peace and comfort waiting for Mr. Armstrong to take us to a place of safety. No such things had happened.

How about now? What are the gun laps we face today? How must we conduct ourselves? Each of us has our own race. Please turn to II Timothy 2.

II Timothy 2:1-6 You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you [I think this is the last letter that Paul wrote, very intense here] have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. [He was saying to go find elders to raise up.] You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. The hard working farmer must be first to partake of the crops. [We will get back to that.]

Albert Barnes had some interesting notes on this. It is interesting to note that many had been described as having left Paul in the previous chapter. Thus, for a start, Paul tells Timothy, and us today, to be strong, relying on the grace, mercy, kindness, and freedom from sin, which in a sense has been given to us when we repent.

Paul was talking to a young ministry stressing to commit things that he heard to others who were qualified men. Paul then said something that applies to each of us: that we are all to endure hardship as a good soldier, and in this society it is difficult to do because of the society we all live in.

Albert Barnes makes the following comments:

Soldiers often endure great privations—taken from their homes, exposed to cold, heat, storms, fatigue, marches, sustaining a course, held to endure as much as a human can bear and indeed sink under the burdens and very possibly die—for reward or for their country's sake, and the soldier of the cross should be willing to do it for the savior's sake.

Please turn to II Corinthians 11. This is Paul and what he has gone through; I hope that none of us has to go through this.

II Corinthians 11:23-30 Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. 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—

besides the other things that comes upon me daily; my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity.

Paul had a really difficult time! He suffered through it because he loved God and was going to finish the calling he had been given. An extremely important example. To be true to God, Paul let nothing stand in his way, but he continued to strive for the goal that had been set for him to achieve. Our trials are different, and perhaps in a different, much more dangerous way for us, because of the penalty that comes with not crossing the finish line.

Paul goes on. The ministry, as a soldier, has to leave all behind so that those who enter in the ministry must do the same. Why? So that their mind might not be diverted from their goal. It is the same with us. We have to have the Kingdom of God as our goal.

We are all to strive for the mastery over Satan, this world, and our human nature. Paul brings this out as in the games. One could not have obtained the wreath in the games unless he played by the rules. We have to do the same thing.

Just as a soldier works for the approval of his captain, we work for the approval of Jesus Christ. In truth, short cuts will not accomplish that. Will we become perfect? No, I wish I could say we would. None of us will be, but the fact that perfection is our goal will settle our heart and our goal in a direction that truly pleases God. We have to aim for it and work toward it.

Albert Barnes commentary on II Timothy 2:6:

It is clear sound according to the marginal reading, the word first (regarding the farmer harvesting), it is introduced in connection with the word labor. Laboring first he must be a partaker. That is a great law! That the husband must work before he can receive the harvest.

This applies to us as well. We must work before we can receive the harvest. We have to work at overcoming and all the little things we have to do. We must work first and then we will see it later in the harvest, and we will be thrilled. Does this apply to us today? Yes it does.

What is one of the gun laps that we face today? Mr. Armstrong used to say, each of us must pray at least half hour a day, and study half hour a day, every day. Even when I got stuck some place, I would always do that. I remember I was in a brand new territory in San Diego and I had to get up to go to work And I thought I did not want to study this day, but I got up and did it anyway. It was the best day I ever had. It was wonderful! It was blessed all the way through my simple mind.

This applies to all of us. I remember as the church was in mourning, we had one minister come to visit, and he stood before us and he said that daily prayer and study was not necessary and if we had something else we wanted to do, we could skip it. If you did not want to pray, do not worry about it today. Some other enterprise was fine with God and it was the same with study. God did not mind that.

Does this approach lead to something negative? You bet it does. When we let down our spiritual food that we need daily, we starve and get into trouble. One day leads to another and one day leads to another and pretty soon we are in deep trouble.

What is the most dangerous lap we face in this society? It is that everybody is letting down around us. This is really a big one. They let down and no penalty comes. It would be easy for us to let down and say no big deal.

We are different from the world around us, and that is really a hard one to take. I told one lady, “You know the Sabbath is the day that man should keep.” She said, “I honor God by worshipping on Sunday.” What I said did not mean a thing and it will not.

John Ritenbaugh said awhile back that he wishes that we could all see the time that he lived. I was born in 1930—I am extremely old. I remember the good times, the playing, the games, the simplest life, marriages stayed together, there were not many robberies even in the tough times during the Depression. It was a good life and we all came home happy and filled with joy.

Today it is different. I hope that we realize this. The institution of marriage is nothing like it used to be. These quotes were based on statistics of 2008. Surveys showed that 13.6 million couples were living together, 60% of married couples lived together prior to marriage. Abortions—hard to believe, it just staggers the mind when you are used to another way of living, but there have been 54,559,650 abortions. How many more in the last years I do not know. That was almost unheard of in my day. I was about 12 years old and heard of one young girl who got pregnant in all of Berkeley, Hayward, Oakland, San Lorenzo, and Piedmont. Today that is nothing.

Divorces are almost a million per year, narcotics and alcohol usage are up. The stranger within our gates we see this especially in Arizona and that neck of the woods. Coming through El Paso I was the honorary white person. My wife and I were in Wal-Mart and had to speak Spanish. Illegals are pouring over the border. The selling of weapons to drug lords; we see this and wonder how can this happen? Sharia law is acceptable in some states, and it seems we have an illegal Muslim President, corruptness in our leaders, and they say we do not need the Constitution.

It is an interesting time we live in. Television and entertainment themes point to the wrong way of life in every aspect and for those who are older, remember the old radio stories? Bad guys always got it and women were always protected. It was a different world at that time.

These decisions are our nation’s destruction. Some major churches welcome homosexuality in their leadership. That is unbelievable too. Homosexual marriage is being approved. I know that some of the people supposedly behind all this feel that the world is over-populated, so that is a good thing to get married if you are homosexual. They are not going to have any children.

All of the above continually wears at us but the big thing for us is that the vast majority of the nation does not consider God to be important in their lives at all! They really do not, even though they have these churches with 20-30 thousand people. They are huge but it is not God's law or God's way.

As we see this country's condition worsen without correction—and that is what hurts, it keeps going down and down—we can begin to let down as well. I know this lady from COGWA, I meet her on the track once in a while in the morning when I walk. She is 84 years old and she met an older lady in her neighborhood who told her that she does not keep Easter. She was surprised and then asked why not? Then it occurred to me that she never reads her Bible.

Another man, who was a minister, was asked, “Did you ever read John 3:13? That no man ascends to heaven.” He was surprised and said he never saw that before! What kind of a minister are you? That

is the frustrating part. In Psalm 73, God is allowing this while many of His people suffer. We see this condition of the country going downhill with no correction, and it is very hard.

Luke 21:34-36 But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.

Every church era, it seems, has had to face times such as these today, and then later, because they had to face these times, disaster came after that.

Matthew 24:11-13 Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. [That is the hard part. That is the gun lap for us, to endure to the end.]

There are ten different words in the New Testament listed as endure. *Strong's #5278, hypoméno* (hoop-om-en-o), and it means to remain under, to persevere, to endure, to sustain, to bear up, to suffer as to a load of miseries, adversities, and persecution with faith, not to let down. The synonyms are longsuffering, patience to one's response toward circumstances, perseverance in the face of difficulties, response toward people denoting a patient endurance of the false, and even of the provocations of others without retaliating. That is what the word means.

Part of “to endure” is to face those who wish to destroy all we have been taught, as it states in verse 5 in that same chapter, also in verse 11. They foretell future events, claiming that they know Christ and when He will return. I know one minister who left WCG, went to Oregon and preached to a bunch of people that Christ was going to return to the Oregon desert in a rocket ship. They went out to meet Him and He did not come, so the people left him. That did not teach him though. He went out and got a new congregation and did it all over again.

That is pretty far out. We face things that are a lot more dangerous. There are those who say the law is done away with. We get those questions all the time. They say we are saved by grace and we do not have to keep the law. What do we do with John 14:15? “If you love Me keep My commandments.” What about I John 3:4? “Sin is the transgression of the law.” It does not matter. We have eternal security once we have accepted Christ, they say.

They do not want anything to do with the law, especially the Sabbath. One that is very popular is that tithing has been done away. When we came to CGG, we heard it was a big thing that others did not have to tithe because God gave Israel their land, or you do not have to tithe until your house is paid for. People believed it and left the church over it. This is what we face. This is a very popular thing, you do not tithe until your house is paid for.

On and on it goes; there is something for everybody, just not the truth. We cannot give into those lies, even though they may please you financially, or some other way. Because of this all the iniquity is running to and fro, while the love of many fades away, it really does. If you have seen the world that we knew under Mr. Armstrong was the protection of large congregations going away and here we are standing on our own now.

We have a congregation of about 19 and it seems large today by comparison to other smaller groups. In spite of all this, he that endures wins the truth, and shall be saved.

I Timothy 4:1-2 Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron.

We have seen this too. In Daniel, a third of the angels were cast down to earth—50 billion? A huge number! They want us to give in and to fall aside for demons. For those who are faithful, there will be other attacks as well. Please turn to II Peter 3.

II Peter 3:1-7 Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? ["Come on, you guys worship Christ, where is He? Look at the mess the world is in. Why is He not here? Why does He not help people?"] For since the fathers fell asleep all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." ["What is wrong with you? Why do you worship this way?"] For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which now exist are kept in store by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. [He is talking about the lake of fire, healing, and sanitizing of the world. It is going to be something awful. They will be purged by fire.]

Hebrews 2:1 Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.

I used to skin dive, and I had a float, an inner tube with a stake hanging down the center of it to pick up abalone (which are totally unclean), and I would spear fish. I would throw the float in next to the pier, right next to the rock, and it would sit there. I would look down once in a while, it was about 2 feet away, the next time I looked it was about 4 feet away. If I did not check it for half an hour it could be on the horizon. It just drifted away. There is a lesson in this for me and for you: Lest we drift away by people who are not in the church, or have left the church.

Hebrews 2:2-3 For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him.

We all know what the word neglect means in every day life. Every one of us understands the term neglect, we have all seen the results of not having oil in the car, the engine gets chewed up. Neglect in business, we fail. Neglect in work, we have job loss. Neglect our marriage, what happens there? We know. How about neglect in prayer and Bible study, what does that mean? Slipping and falling away from the church. It is so important that we do not neglect things.

Is there anything positive? Yes, despite this sin-wrecked, tired world all around us, our calling is the most wonderful positive thing that could ever happen to an individual. Sometimes we lose sight of that.

Ephesians 1:3-4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ [We have been blessed with every spiritual blessings that we need to be in God's Kingdom if we put our back to it. Because of Jesus Christ we are not called to fail.], just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love. . .

We do not always know what this means, whether it is a group at this time to be called or as individuals called prior to the foundation of the world, I do not know, but we have been called specifically because we have what Jesus Christ wants. He chose the weak of the world to confound the wise and He did so we would realize the great need that we have for Him.

Ephesians 1:5-12 . . . having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will. To the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved. [This is you and I. We sometimes do not feel worth anything at all. He chose us and through Him working in us that His goal would be accomplished by working through us. Remember that.] In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence [I hope you can see what the wisdom of this world has produced, but Jesus through His teachings has given us prudence and understanding of how we should live, when the rest of the world does not understand it.], having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself [We know the truth and the world around us at this time does not even begin to know and understand that we live the right way. That is what has been taught us.], that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. [In I Corinthians 15:22-28, that is when it is all done and we are with the Father.] In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.

So many times we look in the mirror, we do not feel we are the praise of anybody's glory. Because we loved and trusted in Jesus, we stood through all the end time trials and we are a praise to Him and to His glory. What a special calling we have been given.

Have you given thought as to who will be with you during the first resurrection?

Revelation 19:6-9 And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." And to her it was granted

to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are the true sayings of God."

Who is going to be called to the marriage supper of the Lamb? Who will be at the wedding supper? Those who ran the gun lap and who have endured, they are going to be at the supper in the end. Please turn to Hebrews 11.

Hebrews 11:39-40 And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise [who are we talking about here? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, they are dead, they did not receive the promise], God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

Guess who is coming to the wedding supper: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Daniel, David, Deborah, Ruth, Mary, Samson, all of those who are God's sheep in Matthew 5, and all those who have gone before us and endured to the end.

This is who is going to be at our wedding supper! Can you picture sitting down with Abraham and talking to him? It will be awesome, that is for us.

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us [I look at this as a crowd sitting up in the bleachers and shouting down, "You can do it, and don't quit!"], looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

He is the One who went first to set the example for each one of us. It should be encouraging to us. What help do we have on this gun lap? We all must run like it or not. Please turn to Hebrews 13.

Hebrews 13:5-6 Let your conduct be without covetousness; and be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say, "The Lord is my helper I will not fear, what can man do to me?"

What did that verse say? It means that I will never, never, never, ever leave you nor forsake you! I am with you at every minute of your trial, trip, and journey. So through these difficult times we know that Jesus Christ and His Father are with us and They will not leave us. He is our firm, solid, sure helper, so let all of us set our minds and hearts to finish the race that we have been given to run.