

When Stacey Miller heard that her father was ill, she quickly packed a few things, made a plane reservation, and hurried to the Hartford-Springfield airport. When she got to the airport in Hartford, she looked for the banks of TV screens which told her when her flight was going to depart for the journey. It was important for her to be at the right gate at the right time so that she didn't miss her flight. The apostle Paul, in writing to Timothy, realizes that he is coming to the end of his life, and he uses language that is similar to what we might use when we are going to catch a plane. He tells us that the time has come for his departure. Paul is saying, "The time has come for me to catch my plane"!

As he sits in the pre-boarding flight area, waiting for the stewardess to announce that boarding will begin, he reflects briefly about his life. The words he says are these, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." I believe that Ron Miller could also have said these words as he lay in critical condition at Bay Medical. You might say, that Bay Medical was the pre-boarding area, before he caught his flight to heaven. Today, we rejoice that he has left the gate and his plane has taken off. Jesus Christ has given him victory over death.. Ron now stands on the Olympic podium before his Savior, and as the national anthem is played, he is "Ready to Receive His Crown."

Life on this earth is not a cake walk as we all know. There are many trials and struggles we face. Paul refers to life on this earth as a battle, a fight. When you look at the apostle Paul's life it was a fight to survive. He tells us that he was tossed into prison frequently. Five times he received from the Jews, the 40 lashes minus one, a severe beating where a whip with pieces of bone dug into your back. Three times Paul was beaten with rods, once they stoned him, three times he was shipwrecked. He was constantly on the move, always looking over his shoulder as to who was out to get him. He often went without food, had many sleepless nights, plus he had a lot of pressures from the different churches he had started. As Paul reflected on his life, he could say, "I fought a good fight. I did not give up on God. I had faith in my Savior Jesus Christ to see me through, and He did. As we look at the life of Ron Miller, we would all agree it was a fight, a real battle. It started out right when Ron was born. He didn't realize it at the time, but he was born with only one kidney. And the one kidney was very small and had a cyst on it. As time moved on, Ron went to Vietnam to serve his country. He actually served in combat. He experienced the horrid Agent Orange as many veterans of Vietnam did, and it had a definite affect on his health. Eventually his one kidney shut down and he had to go on dialysis. Every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, it was time to spend several hours on the dialysis machine. As many of you know dialysis takes a toll on your heart, and other health ailments ensue. Ron had to fight the battle with bypass surgery, having two knees replaced, suffering from frozen shoulders and neuropathy in the fingers. I still remember standing next to him in intensive care as the nurse tried to find a vein to put a line in. She apologized to him and said, "I'm sorry I am hurting you, as he whined in pain." But Ron never complained. He accepted the fight that the Lord had set before him. He was a good soldier. He held his position in the foxhole of life.

Who motivated Ron to be such a fighter? Who gave him the drive to continue on? It was a person named Jesus. You see when Jesus was on this earth, His life was

also a fight or a battle. He had come into this world to save us from our sins, so that we might have a restored relationship with God. The Bible tells us that Jesus has brothers and sisters who thought he was crazy to think he was the Savior. They didn't believe in Him until after He rose from the dead. Jesus was constantly being attacked by the Pharisees and Sadducees during his ministry. He was beaten the 40 lashes minus one for claiming to be the Son of God. Eventually, he was crucified on a cross for nothing He had done wrong, but rather for what we had done wrong. He went through this ordeal, so that by His stripes on that cross, we could be healed. Our sins could be paid for in full. WE could then be successful in all the battles we face in life. Now we know that when we face various battles in life, that God is truly with us, through thick and thin, and will see us through. Jesus fought a good fight for us, and he made sure that Ron and the Apostle Paul were also able to fight a good fight.

The second reason that Paul gives as to why he could be so positive about his upcoming departure, was that he finished the race. We know how Paul STARTED the race. He was actually running on the wrong course. For years Paul, thought that you get to heaven by the works you do in life. By being from the right family, attending the right church. But then he was knocked to the ground on a Damascus Highway. As a result, Paul came to see that how he thought he was getting to heaven was all wrong. He came to see that he was saved simply by having faith in Jesus Christ as His savior. The Bible clearly says, It is by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast." On that Damascus Highway, Paul got on the right course, and ran full speed ahead.

Today a sprinter needs to stay in his lane, and be careful as he runs not to stumble. Also, he needs to reserve some of his strength so he can finish strongly. As I watch young people grow up today, I have seen many get off course, drift from their lanes, stumble, and fall away. They don't finish the race. But Paul faced his departure with confidence, ran straight ahead and finished the race...

The same can be said of Ron Miller. Ron Miller realized staying close to Jesus Christ was important in his life. So he regularly ran the race to church. He received there the strength to continue the race by hearing the Gospel message and taking the Sacrament of the Altar. This was like a Power Bar or a good drink of water for the runner. When he no longer could drive, a power wheel chair kept him going, along with a nice ramp that the Vet's had built for him so he could still be transported around by car. Even though he felt badly about not being able to hear God's Word in church, the Word and communion were brought to him as his mobility decreased.. Meanwhile, he always tried to keep himself busy at home. It may have taken him an hour ½ to do dusting around the house, but he did it. Anything to help out around the house. Before he was ill he washed windows, mowed the lawn, washed and waxed cars, edged, weed wacked. He did whatever was necessary to take care of his family. He ran the race well. Let me assure you all Ron finished his race.

The 3rd reason Paul was so confident about his departure was that he had kept the faith. He said, "I have kept the faith." In spite of the battles, in spite of the difficulties along the way, in spite of the dangers and temptations, Paul remained faithful to Christ to the end! The word for keep the faith, literally means, watch over, to guard.

We need to watch over and guard our faith as if it is a precious treasure. Ron Miller could have blamed God for all his troubles and turned away from Him. But he never did.

He kept the faith. He helped out at church when he could with the Messenger and the bulletins. Ron loved to hear messages from Scripture and how the Lord was his strength and his shield. Ron kept the faith.

And now, what awaits him.. That's right, a crown of righteousness. IN the apostle Paul's day, an Olympic athlete always looked forward to a leafy crown of victory at the end of a race that they won. But you know what, Ron's crown is even better than that. You see, Jesus lived a perfect life while he was here. Jesus was our substitute. Because of his perfect life, when God the Father, looks at us for the sake of Jesus, he sees us as righteous and pure, even while we are on this earth. But still, while on this earth, we make mistakes and mess up. But Jesus says, rest assured, when you reach heaven, you will be righteous around the clock. No more mistakes. Righteous around the clock. And that crown is given to you by my grace, not because you have earned or deserved it. Ron has his crown of Righteousness. Rejoice!

One thing I have always enjoyed about the descriptions of heaven is that it is a place where there are no more tears, no long nights of suffering. But joyful times, eternally. I always tell people, think of the joys you have on earth and multiply them. Think of what brought a smile to Ron's face. Joy of driving to Frankenmuth, and picking up a snack, joy of watching the egrits, the joy of spending time with his dog, or taking a trip around Michigan and seeing the beauties of Pure Michigan. Or what about the joys of getting that watermelon in Vietnam, shipped from the States. The piece that Ron saved for himself, sure tasted good. Or what about the Cedar Point trip, taking in some exciting rides and purchasing a \$5.00 balloon. A balloon which Ron took from Stacey so she wouldn't lose it, and then ended up losing it himself. A priceless joyfilled memory. Up in heaven those joys will be multiplied over and over again.

So should we feel badly for Ron today. No way. Yet I'm sure Stacey will miss those phone calls, where Ron would speak for two minutes before Stacey went to work. Right now, Ron is talking to Stacey via the phone of God's Word. Here is the call: "Hi Stacey, I'm ok. Love you. Talk to you later." And you know Stacey, he will talk to you later. And later won't be that long, before we see each other again in heaven. Daddy's little girl knows that same Savior as Ron, so a reunion is guaranteed.

The apostle Paul says this place, is reserved for all who long for His appearing. That is, for all who know and believe that Jesus Christ alone is the way the truth and the life, and that no one comes to the Father, but by Him. That means we are part of Ron's family. So, what about your relationship with Jesus? Do you really believe He is your only hope for salvation and heaven? Are you cultivating a relationship right now, to get to know him better? It is not so important how you start the race, but how you finish it. May we all grow closer to this Savior, who has done so much for Ron and also for us. And may we one day receive that same crown that is Ron's even now. Amen.