

## **Gentlemen, Start Your Engines**

NASCAR fans call it "start-and-park." It is either the apex of entrepreneurial genius or the nadir of poor sportsmanship.

One assumes a stock car team sets out to win the race. Yes, that's where the big money is, but it's also the point of the whole thing. A new breed of contestants, however, has concocted a way to game the system. Teams keep initial outlay low by putting minimal money into their vehicles, then pick races with a low number of entries so they don't have to qualify. They hit the gas at the green flag, burn off a few laps and then quit while the guaranteed money for last place still outweighs expenses. Since you don't risk tearing up your vehicle or stock spare tires and extra parts, or even field a pit crew, it isn't hard to keep on the upside of the P&L margins. You never win but you also never crash and your ROI remains steady. At the Cup level, teams can average around a million bucks this way.

It works as a business model and there's no rule against it, but it somehow seems wrong. Races, after all, should be about winning, and winning should be about the finish line, not the bottom line.

Paul had no use for start-and-park saints who saw some abstraction called "Heaven" as the payout for a last-place Christian life. He scorned a theology that emphasized a guaranteed salvation over a risky sanctification. As Caesar's executioner waived a checkered flag outside the apostle's prison cell, the great road warrior told his back-up driver Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4.7).

Not that he had some pseudo-spiritual aversion to rewards. "In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day" (verse 8). But for him, the prize flows organically from the endeavor: the natural reward of a race is victory; the proper pay-off for serving Christ is seeing Christ.

Accordingly, Paul piles up three perfect tenses to show that his expected outcome is the logical conclusion of his outlay: fought, finished, kept. The Greek grammar speaks of completed action that ransacks the opportunities of faith and results in a righteousness made full only at the finish line.

This isn't some kind of spiritual elitism. Paul goes on to say that God has enough loving cups to keep every saint sipping Champaign for all eternity. "Not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing" (verse 8). This Indy 500 invites all of us to chug as much milk as we have saints to drink it. This winner's circle surrounds the throne of glory and has room for all the saints to turn back-flips forever. It's not a competition, a question of finishing first or fastest, but a matter of completion – that we continue instead of quitting.

So let's get our transmissions out of park and put away our extended pit stops. The race itself rewards those who run, and quitters who ask for little get exactly what they desire.

Vroom!

Doug