



Central Peninsula Church

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2 Timothy 4:6-8
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Finish Well

SERIES: *A Life That Counts: Studies in 2 Timothy*

The final words of dying men and women usually are stripped of hypocrisy and reflect their true beliefs and feelings. On his deathbed, Napoleon said, "I die before my time; and my body will be given back to earth, to become the food of worms. Such is the fate which so soon awaits the great Napoleon."

Not long before he died, Gandhi, the Hindu leader, confessed, "My days are numbered. I am not likely to live very long - perhaps a year or a little more. For the first time in 50 years I find myself in a slough of despond. All about me is darkness. I am praying for light."

The nineteenth-century French statesman Talleyrand wrote this on a piece of paper and laid it on his night stand: "Behold, 83 years passed away! What cares! What agitation! What anxieties! What ill-will! What sad complications! And all without other results, except great fatigue of mind and body, and a profound sentiment of discouragement with regard to the future, and of disquiet with regard to the past!"

How different are the words of the apostle Paul as he neared the end of his earthly life. They're more like a triumphant epitaph. Thirty years after his encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road, in every regard that matters, he was without remorse. With an economy of words he not only affirms his own sense of completion but also offers an example of a life well lived right to the end. What Paul says here as he reflects on his life is what we want to be able to say when we realize our time is up.

Paul is writing from a prison cell in Rome to his young protégé, Timothy. While Paul awaits execution, Timothy is trying to lead a troubled church in Ephesus. It strikes me that Paul must have felt that his was not a good time to die. I mean, it must have seemed to Paul that the Christian faith stood on the brink of extinction. Here this church that he'd spent two-and-a-half years establishing is going haywire. Who'll stop the bleeding? He leaves Timothy there because he's the best man he's got. But now Timothy is wavering. His inexperience, his frailty, his timidity has him ready to bail out. God never seems to work on our timetable, does he? His timing rarely makes sense to us. There had to be times when Paul wondered, "Lord, why now?"

I'm sure it was with those unanswered questions that Paul reveals to Timothy in a few brief sentences his most intimate thoughts. He reflects on his own life from three perspectives; first, the present; then the past, and finally, the future. In doing so, he shows Timothy and he shows us that if you want to die well you have to live well.

"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 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; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

I. The Present: Paul's life is about over and he's ready.

As Paul looks at his life from the perspective of the present, he knows his time has come. The previous verse started with the words "But you...", now he turns to himself and says, "For I..." The reason Timothy should do all the things in v. 5 is that Paul is on his way out. But you don't get any sense here of fear, or of regret, or of bitterness. Perhaps that's because of how he views his death.

Some people view death as just a normal part of life. We're physical beings and that means we have to die and when we die we just cease to exist. Others view it as some kind of welcomed entrance into spiritual oneness with the universe. You just get engulfed into some kind of collective consciousness. Still others view it as the ultimate rip-off. It's like a bitter pill that we do everything we can to resist.

But notice Paul views his own death differently. He uses two vivid metaphors to describe it. *First, Paul's sees himself being poured out like a drink offering.* This is a figure taken from the OT sacrificial system. The book of Numbers explains that when the people of Israel offered up an animal, they would end the ritual by pouring out wine at the base of the altar. That image of a final offering being poured out, with the red wine splashing down on the altar, stuck in Paul's mind. Five years earlier in the book of Philippians he described himself as **"being poured out like a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith"** (2:17). Now, as he writes Timothy, this offering is being completed. He might have even been thinking of the type of execution he expected to experience. As a Roman citizen he couldn't be crucified, but he would likely be beheaded, literally pouring out his blood for the Lord. But Paul didn't see it as an execution; he saw it as an offering. Nobody was taking anything away from him; instead he was giving something to the Lord.

Not only that, *Paul sees his death as a kind of departure to a new destination.* He says, "the time of my departure has come." That word for "departure" is a fascinating one. It was a word used to describe the loosening of bonds or fetters, or the pulling up of the stakes of a tent so that you

could set out once again, or the loosening of the moorings of a ship in order to set sail.

It kind of reminds me of being a kid and departing on a road trip for vacation. My dad would pack the station wagon the night before. My mom would wake my brother and I up while it was still dark. We would pile in the back seat with our sleeping bags, the smell of hot coffee wafting through the cold air, and we'd drive off into the night with all the anticipation of little boys on a great adventure.

That's how Paul views his soon-to-be death. It was a departure. It was liberation from his chains. He was striking camp again, just he had done countless times on his missionary journeys through Asia Minor. He was once again loosening the moorings and setting sail for a new destination. It's like C.S. Lewis describes in his book, *The Last Battle*. The deceased children learn that "they're beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Is that how you view death? As the pouring out of an offering to the Lord? As a departure on the way to a great adventure? That's how Paul viewed his present circumstances and impending death.

II. The Past: Paul's life is an athletic contest and he's been faithful.

Part of the reason Paul could face his present circumstances without fear is because of the way he lived in the past. He says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith."

In 1904 William Borden, from the Borden dairy family, finished high school in Chicago and was given a world cruise as a graduation present. While he was traveling through the Far East he began to develop a burden for those without Christ. When he came home he spent the next seven years at Princeton University, the first four in undergraduate work and the next three in seminary. While he was in school, he wrote in the back of his Bible: "No reserves." Although his family pleaded with him to take over the family business he was determined to go to the mission field. After he disposed of all his wealth, he added the words "No retreat" after the words "No reserves." On his way to China, he contracted cerebral meningitis and died within a month. After his death, someone leafing through his bible discovered these final words added to the others: "No regrets." Even though he never made it to the mission field, he knew that he'd been faithful to what the Lord called him to do.

That's what Paul expresses here as he looks back on his life. He'd lived for Christ with no reserves, no retreat, and no regrets. He may not have always been successful, but he'd been faithful.

All three of these statements relate to athletics.

The verb translated "fought" here is *agonizomai*. In 1 Cor. 9:25 this word is translated "**to compete in the games.**" In other places it means to "make every effort, struggle, wrestle, and strive." We can probably paraphrase the verse like this: "I have competed well in the competition, I have finished the course, I have kept the rules." It's interesting, he doesn't say that he has won the competition or the race, but that he competed in it and he finished it. He was faithful.

Our goal is to be faithful, to be able to say at the end of our lives: "I didn't hold anything back; I didn't quit; I wasn't disqualified." In these statements he gives a few secrets on how to live like that.

First, he recognized that he was in a spiritual struggle. His life had been a fight; a battle. Paul described that battle so vividly in Ephesians 6, "**Our struggle,**" he says, "**is not against flesh and blood** (people are not basically our problem) **but with principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places**" (Eph 6:12). In other words, Paul sees himself as having grappled with these clever, deceitful beings who are constantly at work in human life to interject lies and attractive fantasies to delude us, deceive us, and to lead us into sin. That's where his battle has been. And it's not just in his head. It's something that involved him in persecution, in beatings and stonings. Paul sees it as having been a tough, hard fight, but at last he's reached the end. "I have fought the good fight," he says. I am sure most of you are saying to yourselves, "I hope I can say that when I get to the end." To do that you first have to understand that life is a battle against invisible forces.

Second, he recognized that the battle he was in was the right battle. Paul says he fought "the good fight." That word "good" means noble or beautiful. Paul's struggle had been in the noblest and grandest of all struggles. It's like Gandolf says at a critical juncture in *Lord of the Rings*, "The battle for Middle Earth has begun." Ultimately, the only battle worth expending ourselves for is that of the kingdom of God. That's the noble struggle. You know what everybody learns sooner or later? That life is a struggle. In some way or another everybody gets beat up in this life. We all struggle, but are we in the right struggle? Are we fighting the good fight? Are we expending ourselves for the noblest cause? You don't want to get to the end of your life and say, "I fought hard...but for what?"

Third, Paul recognized that there was a specific course he was to stay on until he was finished. "I finished the course," he says. He wasn't allowed to wander off the track; he didn't cut his own path through the forest. He had a course that God had put him on and he intended to complete it. In Acts 20 Paul was saying goodbye to the elders at Ephesus, and said, "**I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus...**" What Paul set out to do he'd now finished. To stay on that course must have required some focus and some concentration and some self-discipline. All of us have a course to run. And if we're followers of Christ, we really don't get to choose it. He chooses it for us. We don't get to decide how long or short it is, or when we have to go uphill, or when we get to go downhill. We

don't get to decide when the road is bumpy or when the road is smooth. Remember when Jesus said to Peter, **“Peter, when you were younger you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished, but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.’ Then Peter looked over at John and said, ‘What about him? And Jesus answered, ‘If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!’”** (John 21:18-23). You see, my course may be different than your course, so it's no use comparing.

Fourth, Paul recognized he had a treasure to guard. When he says “I kept the faith,” he means that he's kept safe the whole body of truth that is the gospel, what he calls in chapter one “the good deposit.” On the very edge of eternity he can say of himself, “I have kept the faith. I've not lost any of the good deposit which God entrusted to me. I guarded it as a treasure.” Paul kept this treasure from being mistreated or distorted by those who would twist it and use it for their own purposes. He's answered his critics. He's warned those who would misuse it. As we've seen the last two weeks, that deposit of faith is contained in the Scripture. When we get to the end of our lives, we want to be able to say that we have treasured and guarded that deposit of truth found in the Bible.

A young French girl was born blind. After she learned to read by touch, she was given a copy of the Gospel of Mark in braille. She read it so much her fingers developed calluses and couldn't use it anymore. Then she tried to cut the calluses off but that made it worse. Finally, she gave the book a good-bye kiss and said, “Farewell, farewell sweet word of my Heavenly Father.” In doing so, she discovered that her lips were more sensitive than her fingers, and she spent the rest of her life reading and treasuring the Scriptures with her lips!

When we get to the end of our life, we want to look back and say, “I fought the good fight, I finished the course, I kept the faith.”

III. The Future: Paul's life will be rewarded and he is expectant.

The final perspective that Paul reflects on is the future. It may seem he didn't have much of a future. But he saw a future that was bright and glorious. He's looking forward to being awarded the crown of righteousness. That's not a literal crown given as a reward for a righteous life, but rather a metaphorical crown consisting of righteousness. In other words, we will become righteous. When we trust Christ as our Savior, we're counted as righteous, but when we see him face to face we'll be made righteous through and through. That crown is “laid up” for us; it is safely stored and carefully guarded. No one can take it from us.

Some people believe that though salvation is based on grace, rewards are based on works. But rewards from God are not payment for services but a gracious gift from a generous God. They're independent of human achievement. Remember the parable of the laborers, where those who had worked one hour received the same pay as those who worked the entire day (Matt. 20:1–16)? When the latter complained, the owner asked, ‘Do you

begrudge my generosity?’ The bestowal of rewards is by God's grace on the basis of our willingness to walk in the good works God has prepared beforehand (Eph. 2:10). We're promised power to enable us to do what is asked of us. That's why Paul states that he will not speak of any accomplishments except those that Christ has done through him (Rom. 15:18). Any good work done through Christ in the power of the Spirit is an act of grace; any reward given by God at the judgment seat of Christ is also an act of grace. Rewards, like salvation, are God's gifts.

Paul says he'll receive this crown from “the righteous judge.” We learned up in v. 1 that this is the Lord Jesus. Soon Paul would appear before Nero, the unrighteous judge. After examining Paul, he'll pronounce him guilty and condemn him to death. But Paul knew Nero's judgment would shortly be reversed by the Lord himself. Jesus knew Paul, and he will hand him his award. What a wonderful thing it will be to have the Lord himself hand to us, with pierced hands, the righteousness for which we have been waiting all our life. What a great hope we have!

But it's not just for Paul or for missionaries like Paul. He says it's for “all who have loved his appearing.” The way Paul puts this I believe he's talking about both his first and second appearing. In essence he's saying this reward is for all who have loved the righteous judge, the Lord Jesus. Do you love his appearing? If you're a Christian, you do. You love the story of his first appearing, of his moving about among men, healing the sick, raising the dead, touching the empty, lonely lives around him, bringing them joy and peace; you love the story of the mystery of the cross and the glory of the resurrection. Remember the song?

*Tell me the old, old story
of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory,
of Jesus and His love.*

We love his appearing; both his past appearing and the prospect of his future appearing. Jesus is the One we long to see. The Christian life is not a mere philosophy of being good to your fellow man. It includes that, but that's not all of it. It's all centered on one Person, the Lord Jesus. He's the center of our faith. The thing we ought to expect more than anything else is the fulfillment of seeing him and being with him. I love those words in the hymn, *The Sands of Time Are Sinking*:

*The bride eyes not her garment,
but her dear Bridegroom's face.
I will not gaze at glory
but on my King of grace.
Not at the crown He giveth,
but on his pierced hands,
For the Lamb is all the glory
of Emmanuel's land.*

That was Paul's expectation. That's what undergirded him here at the end of his life. Some say that Christianity is

just pie-in-the-sky. But if you don't have the hope of glory you have nothing to nerve you and motivate you now. If you don't have the expectation that God is working out great purposes in which you'll have a part, your life will be lifeless and nerveless at the present. It's that hope which steadies us.

CONCLUSION

And this is what Timothy needed. He needed hope. And that hope would steady him to live the kind of life that Paul had lived. A life where he could see his own death, not as some kind of fearful tragedy, but as an offering to the Lord and an exciting departure on a new adventure. A life where he would fight the good fight, finish the course, and keep the faith. A life where he could die well because he had lived well.

We wonder, why is this so important? Why does this matter to us? For the same reason it mattered to Paul and to Timothy. Someone has said, Christianity is always one generation from extinction. I don't know if that's true or not, but it's true that every generation of Christ-followers has to take its own call to fight the good fight and finish the course and keep the faith seriously. We say, "Well, what would it matter in the big picture if I bailed out?"

At 7 P.M. on October 20, 1968, just a few thousand spectators were left in the Mexico City Olympic stadium. It was cool and dark. The last of the marathon runners, each exhausted, were being carried off to first-aid stations. The winner had finished more than an hour earlier. As the remaining spectators prepared to leave, those sitting near the marathon gates heard the sound of sirens and police whistles. All eyes turned to the gate. A lone figure wearing number 36 and the colors of Tanzania entered the stadium. His name was John Steven Akhwari. He was the last man to finish. He'd fallen during the race and injured his knee and ankle. Now, with his leg bloodied and bandaged, he grimaced with each hobbling step around the 400 meter track. The spectators rose and applauded him. After he finally crossed the finish line Akhwari slowly walked off the field. Later, a reporter asked him, "Why did you continue the race after being so badly hurt?" He replied, "My country did not send me 7,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 7,000 miles to finish it."

You see, it doesn't matter so much that we've started, but it matters how we finish. It matters because we matter to God and because he's sent us on this course to finish. So live well now, with the finish line in view, so that you die well later.