



Last Words of a Christian Warrior

Series: 2 Timothy: The Final Charge From a Faithful Apostle

2 Timothy 4:6-8

January 4, 2015

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For every person, there will come a last meal, a last breath and last words ever spoken. And in many ways, what we say in the end is a real insight into what we were in life, what we stood for and what we lived for. Generally, we die as we have lived. Alexander the Great, who had conquered land from Macedonia to Pakistan, died at the age of 33, with his boots on, weeping: "There are no more other worlds to conquer!" Karl Marx, born in a Christian Jewish family, the father of Communism, while on his deathbed, surrounded by candles burning to Lucifer, screamed at his nurse who asked him if he had any last words: "Go on, get out! Last words are for fools who haven't said enough." Sir Thomas Scott, once president of the English Lower House said: "Up until this time, I thought that there was no God neither Hell. Now I know and feel that there are both, and I am delivered to perdition by the righteous judgment of the Almighty." Ghandi, the world-renowned Hindu religious leader, not long before he died confessed: "My days are numbered. I am not likely to live very long --- perhaps a year or a little more. For the first time on fifty years I find myself in a slough of despond. All about me is darkness. I am praying for light." Last words can be very revealing of the heart.

That holds true for this text that we are looking at this morning. These words come from a man who lived life with an eternal, heavenward, Christ-exalting perspective and they are well worth our study. Paul had just delivered to Timothy the charge that was to define and dominate his life from this point forward, the ideal for which he was to strive and to labor, the end to which he was to commit his life. The words thunder forth with the passion of a man who loved Jesus Christ dearly, who treasured his Savior and the Word of God. "Guard the good deposit of the gospel...preach the Word...always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." These words had been the banner over Paul's own life as he had sought to worship and serve his Redeemer and Lord, Jesus Christ, and to serve His church faithfully and fervently since the moment of his conversion. It was a banner he was now transferring to Timothy. As for Paul, he was at the end of the line. He is in the Mamertine

prison in Rome incarcerated in a stone and mud pit with a single hole in the floor and a single hole above his head. No furniture. No windows. It is a dank, dark hole in the ground.

This is not a glamorous end by earthly standards, not a going out in a blaze of glory. Imprisoned in the filth of this prison cell befouled with the odor of rot, the odor of his own urine and excrement, his body twisted and permanently marred by the beatings and hardships – the suffering – that he had endured for Christ’s sake, Paul is awaiting the summons from Nero that will end with his beheading outside the city of Rome on the Ostian Way. He is awaiting an ignominious end to a faithful, honorable, and eternally meaningful life, to a life well-pleasing to His Master, Jesus Christ. Here we have Paul’s last words regarding his own life, a valedictory of sorts in three short verses. He begins with a look at his present condition.

Paul’s Present Condition (v.6) Paul writes to Timothy: “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.” (2 Timothy 4:6, ESV) Don’t read these words as a solemn resignation to his impending death. To do that dishonors Paul, dishonors Christ who chose Him as His own instrument carry forth His holy name before the Gentiles, and kings, and children of Israel and to suffer for the glory and the name of Christ, and it misses the point.

Paul deliberately describes his impending death in OT sacrificial terms. He calls it a “drink offering.” The drink offering was a part of the offerings that were made by the Israelites before the Lord as acts of worship. The burnt offering was the offering for sin and for atonement with God. The grain offering was the offering of thanksgiving and the drink offering was the offering of joy – all of them pleasing and satisfying to the Lord. In speaking of his life as a drink offering, we get a picture of this aged Apostle’s heart and mind regarding both his life and death. His life had been one lived upon the altar, as a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which (was his) spiritual worship.” (Romans 12:1, ESV) And now, he viewed his death as a joyful sacrifice to the Lord for the sake of the gospel. Paul had gladly lived his life for the sake of the One who had poured out his atoning blood for him and who had poured spiritual blessings upon his soul. This man who had offered up himself as a living sacrifice in light of the mercies of God now counted it a joy to pour out his life up the last full measure. He didn’t view his death as a tragedy, as an unfair calamity in light of his faithful service. He sees his death, instead, as the culminating offering of a sacrificial life.

He knows what kind of death will await him as a Roman citizen – beheading, the pouring out of his life’s blood – and he faces it with both courage and joy. There are no second thoughts, no pining over “might-have-beens,” no pleading for one more day, no despair, no defeat, no discouragement. He is ready to depart and to be with His Lord. He is at peace, confident and assured that the way that he has spent his life has been well worth it.

You can see it in the word that he uses to describe his death, the word “departure.” It is a rich word. It is a Greek word that was used of a prisoner being set free. Paul was being set free from the bonds of this human flesh once and for all to behold Christ face-to-face. It was a word used of oxen that were unyoked after finishing a hard day’s work. Paul’s labors in the gospel were now complete. It was a word used of a soldier, who after the battle was finished would strike his tent to return home. Paul’s fight had come to an end, and now the peace and rest of home was waiting. And it was a word used of unmooring a ship to set sail for a voyage. Paul was loosed, ready to set into the greatest deep of all, cross the waters of death, to arrive in the port of Heaven.

J. R. R. Tolkien brings this out in his epic *Lord of the Rings*, as the work of Gandalf, Elrond, Galadriel, Bilbo, and Frodo Baggins are finished, so they meet at the Grey Havens to board a ship that will take them to the undying lands where they will never face death. Tolkien describes the scene with the words “the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and [Frodo] beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise” [LOTR, 3:310]. Paul is ready to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better, and he has no regrets about his life. That much is made clear in the three clipped sentences that he uses to summarize an extraordinary life of faithfulness, of service and of worship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul’s Past Life Summarized in Three Sentences (v.7) Much lesser men have exhausted thousands of pages in numerous autobiographies to make much of far lesser lives. In contrast to such pedantic wordiness, Paul says simply: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” (2 Timothy 4:7, ESV) What an economy of words and profundity of meaning. He looks back on his life and says:

I have fought the good fight...Not a good fight, but “the” good fight, the only fight worth Paul’s life. Paul has expended his energies, his vitality, his strength, his fortitude, his life in the only worthy thing, the singularly worthy and lasting thing – the gospel of his Lord and King, Jesus Christ. This is not braggadocio, not pompous boasting by Paul, but rather it is an expression born of gratitude and of certainty.

Paul was a fighter by nature and for much of his life he had fought hard for the wrong things – Jewish nationalism, Pharisaical legalism, religious tradition, and the eradication of Christianity. By God’s grace, this fighter more than met his match when Christ conquered him on the Damascus Road. This man who deserved judgment and destruction was instead conquered by the grace, mercy and forgiving love of Christ. The glorious and risen Jesus had conquered his rebel soul and saved him entirely by His grace and for His eternal purposes. Paul’s whole life changed in an instant. Like he testified to the Philippians, as a result of that encounter with Christ, his entire life changed. “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:7–14, ESV)

He went from fighting the worthless fight to fighting the good fight and this he had done unto this very day and he would not shrink back even with the sword looming over his neck. He may not have been much to look at physically, but if you could see him in the Spirit, with spiritual eyes, you would see him not dressed in rags but clothed with Christ. You would see a warrior clothed with the armor that he described in Ephesians 6 that had served him well over these last many years. With eyes of the Spirit, you would see a man clothed with the belt of truth, worn so long, in so many battles, a belt that had become one with him and which he wore almost as a second skin. You would see a breastplate of righteousness, marred and marked by the blows the enemy, a breastplate that had preserved him in many a battle and kept his heart and soul intact despite the rigors of the fight. You would see a man standing fast in studded

boots of the gospel of peace – the peace with God that comes from faith in Christ and which had kept his standing secure through many a fight with temptation and in many a gospel battle. You would see a shield, charred and scarred from a host of fiery battles, the shield of faith in Christ and in His word that had shattered many an enemy’s blow, and which had splintered and extinguished many a fiery shaft from the enemy meant to destroy him. On his old, gray head a helmet that bears the dents and scrapes of blows from the enemy meant to take his soul’s life, the helmet of salvation which has guarded his mind in Christ Jesus, confirming in him that he is saved and will be saved, able therefore to stand with confidence in the most vicious of assaults. And last, if you had the eyes of the Spirit to see, you would see a sword, the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God, a sword that he had wielded for so long, so well, that it seems to be one with his arm. You would see the consummate spiritual warrior, if you have eyes to see, despite the outward condition of this aged man.

Paul had contended with sin, with temptation, with sensuality and immorality, with godlessness, with false teachers and false brethren, with false doctrine, with his own fleshliness and ultimately “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12, ESV) He had fought the good fight. He had lost some battles along the way, but ultimately, in all these things, he was more than a conqueror through Christ who loved him (cf. Rom, 8:37). He fought the good fight. Moreover, Paul says:

I have finished the race...Paul envisioned the Christian life as a race. You remember the way that he described it in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 when he wrote: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:24–27, ESV) As in those words from I Cor. 9, Paul could say “I have not run aimlessly.” He had run the course that the Lord had placed before him. His ambition that he expressed to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:24 -- “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” (Acts 20:24, ESV) – had come to fruition.

Paul did not view the Christian life as a wind sprint, but as a long haul, as a persistent running in the same direction. Lots of times, commentators and preachers will refer to the Christian life as a marathon. That's a good analogy but I envision it more as a steeplechase. I don't know if you have ever seen one, but the steeplechase is a long distance run with obstacles – hurdles and water hazards and other runners. Dudes wipe out all the time and then have to get up and keep running the race with bruised knees and skinned up elbows. Sometimes they navigate the obstacles well and sometimes they hit the deck hard, but they get up and keep going. It takes physical, mental and emotional endurance.

Here is the point. Paul was a finisher. He didn't give up or quit when he fell down. By the grace of Christ, by the strength of the Spirit, he laid hold of "His divine power (which) has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence," (2 Peter 1:3, ESV) and he kept going all the way to the finish line. Paul's was a life and calling fraught with obstacles and opportunities to quit. "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches." (2 Corinthians 11:24–28, ESV) Despite all of this, Paul was a finisher.

God delights in finishers. Our society and even our churches are filled with starters. Everyone likes to start. There is a certain excitement about starting something. People start workout programs, self-improvement plans, new child rearing strategies, new jobs, new stuff all the time but there are few who finish well. We all know people who began the Christian life with what appeared to be real enthusiasm and a flourish of activity but who ultimately fell away. Not Paul. Paul finished well. In fact, what he says next sums it all up.

I have kept the faith...This is the sum of it all. Above all else that Paul could say, this is the climax. Only five words, but what Paul says is a mouthful. "Though I have failed and faltered and fallen at times, though I have wrestled with doubts, though I have been tempted to question my calling, though I have suffered the loss of friend and of those I thought were fellow followers and servants of Christ, though I have lost my former prestige and reputation,

thought I have been thought a fool by many and possessed by a demon by some, though I have engaged all manner of false teaching and false teachers – some of them persuasive, though I have relinquished all chance for a life of ease and earthly security, though I have nothing to my name save for a cloak, some books and a parchment or two...I have kept the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ and that is enough, more than enough. I have kept faith WITH Christ and kept the faith that he has entrusted to me, guarding the good deposit of the gospel, keeping it pure and unadulterated with error.” This was the great and enduring testimony of Paul’s life. And in light of this Spirit-empowered faithfulness, Paul looked forward to a glorious future.

Paul’s Glorious Future Hope (v.8) Here was Paul’s great hope, the hope that sustained and thrilled his soul throughout his life. He says: “Henceforth 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 4:8, ESV) Again, this is not braggadocio by Paul, it is the expectation of the very faith that he kept, the promises of God that he believed. Paul looked forward to a crown of righteousness, the reward of God for the faithful. Certainly, Paul faithful perseverance in the faith to the end was enabled by God’s grace. But that in no way diminished the reality of Paul’s spiritual determination “to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” (Colossians 1:10, ESV)

Paul had entrusted himself to God and lived in light of Christ’s appearing and of the very real reward that would be his on the day when he saw Jesus in all of his resplendent glory. He kept the faith with his eyes focused on the eternal prize, the lasting prize – the crown of righteousness which he would receive from the Lord’s own hands. One writer puts it this way: He longs for a day when he will not only (because he already is) stand before the Lord fully forgiven; he longs for that day when sin will have been totally eradicated from him, when its presence and power is gone. When he stands before God because of his faith-union with Jesus Christ not only in the imputed righteousness of Christ, but cleansed of sin forever—never again having to struggle with sin and temptation, fully restored to the image of God. That’s what he longs for. Think of how he envisions this reward.

It is a certain reward. It is “laid up” or “stored” in heaven for Paul, untouchable and certain to be bestowed. It is a glorious reward -- the crown of righteousness. It is a personal reward, to be received from the Lord Himself. It is the Lord, the righteous Judge, who will reward him. Not too long from now, Nero, the unrighteous king, will have him beheaded. But in “that Day” the Lord himself will personally reverse Nero’s earthly judgment. Paul will receive this reward

directly from Jesus Christ. It is a future reward Paul will receive on the day Jesus Christ returns from heaven. And it is a shared reward. It is not just for Paul but also for everyone who loves the Lord and His glorious appearing.

This is what is ahead for you and me if we will faithfully serve Jesus Christ in this life, beloved. This is what we are to be living for. This is why we must remain steadfast in our faith, why we must fight the good fight, why we must finish the race despite the obstacles, why we must keep the faith. Be encouraged, child of God. God sees and he knows the reality of your faith, and in “that day,” the Lord himself will reward us if we are faithful to him now. This is a vision worth living and dying for, worth expending all of your energies for. This is the great goal that fuels an exemplary life for the Lord. Paul lived with goal in mind –pleasing the Lord and receiving His praise. Is that the goal for which you are living today? Can you say with all honesty “I am fighting the good fight. I am running the race. I am keeping the faith.”? Can we say these things, because in the final analysis, this is all that matters. Really, all that matters.

You know, as I have thought about this text, several thoughts have come to my mind. The truth, as hard as it is to say, is that this text is not much needed or heeded in the modern church today. Paul had a faith that cost, really cost, a lot. It was a costly thing to hold fast to the Word of God, to stand on the Word of God, to remain faithful to Christ, to His gospel of substitutionary sacrifice, to preach and teach words that dripped with gospel truth, that magnified the Lord and His holiness and His grace, that fearlessly confronted sin and spoke openly and unashamedly of His coming judgment. For those who tread lightly in the truth, who take gospel faithfulness lightly, who treat the gospel and God’s holy law as elastic, who shy away from the cost of discipleship, who labor to preserve themselves and their reputation and popularity, these final words from Paul fall flat. They just don’t resonate with the soul as they should.

And here’s the second thing, the reason that these words don’t resonate as they should, is that the motivation to fighting the good fight, to running the race, and keeping the faith – the crown of righteousness from the hand of Christ – is wholly insufficient to those who are not spiritually minded, who are not eternally minded, but who are earthbound in their motivations and desires. The great goal and vision of Paul’s life – the goal and vision that we should share, beloved – was to see Jesus face-to-face, to receive the crown of righteousness from Jesus, personally. But to those whose chief desire and chief longing is vacation, ease, financial security, working for the weekend, the latest novelty, fad, fashion or trend, living the good life or some other temporal enticement, the motivation of living to please Christ and to receive His praise is not moving or gripping in any way. It is hardly considered at all. Oh beloved, may that never be us. May we have eyes and hearts to long for what really matters and to live lives that reflect that ardent love and longing for Christ that epitomized Paul.

The third thing that strikes me is that if this text is preached, many many times it is reduced to a method or a prescription for “leaving a personal legacy.” I would say to you that this misses Paul’s point entirely. Paul’s goal was not to leave a personal legacy. His goal was to faithfully follow, serve, worship and magnify Christ to the last, full, measure of devotion. To view this in any other way is to make man the star of the story. The goal here is not to try to establish and leave a testimony to your own legacy. That was never Paul’s focus. Instead, it was the fame and glory of Christ and the enduring truth of His gospel that he sought to exalt.

Last of all, when I read this text it challenges my soul deeply. I think to myself how empty, how hollow, how worthless is a life that never stands for anything of eternal worth, that never stands with and for Christ, that isn’t given to something bigger, greater, more significant, than himself. How empty, how sad a life that never knows the pain and the joy, the struggle and the triumph, the cost and the blessing of standing with Christ, for Christ, for His glory, for His truth, for His praise, for His Name. It reminds me of the words of Theodore Roosevelt who said: It is not the critic who counts; nor the one who points out how the strong person stumbled, or where the doer of a deed could have done better. The credit belongs to the person who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who does actually strive to do deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotion, spends oneself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who at worst, if he or she fails, at least fails while daring greatly. Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those timid spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.

Those are wise words indeed, but especially and really only when they are read and applied in the light of this text today. My prayer for us beloved is that we might live so that we may be able to say with Paul, with honesty, by the empowering grace and mercy of God’s Spirit, in light of the great salvation that we have received from Christ, with minds and hearts captured by His love, His faithfulness, His Truth these words: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth 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 4:7–8, ESV)

You know how you do that? Start with today, this week, this month...this moment.

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