

The Triumphant Epitaph of Paul, Part 1

Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:6

Code: 55-24

INTRODUCTION

A. The Meaning of Life

1. From an unbeliever's perspective

When you're near death, your final words will tend to be stripped of any hypocrisy and reflect your view of life. Near the end of his life, the notorious French statesman Talleyrand wrote, "Eighty-three years have passed! I am not sure I am pleased when I think back over how those years were spent. How many useless uproars there were; how many failures; how many outrageous complications; how much wasted emotion and energy, and how much wasted ability! Hatreds have been aroused, illusions lost, tastes jaded. And with what result? Moral and physical exhaustion, complete discouragement with respect to the future, deep disgust with respect to the past" (J. F. Bernard, *Talleyrand: A Biography* [N. Y. : G. P. Putnom's Sons, 1973], pp. 599-600).

2. From a believer's perspective

Paul's response to his imminent death is a stark contrast to that of the despairing unbeliever: "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 Tim. 4:6-8). His words convey hope, joy, and victory, not despair or frustration.

B. The Ministry of Paul

Paul was a faithful shepherd of God's flock. His life was often in danger as he preached the gospel and nurtured the church. He was deeply concerned about the church's welfare. False teachers were teaching a false gospel, and some within the professing church were "paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1). In addition, Paul was concerned about Timothy's spiritual life and therefore encouraged him to be courageous and faithful for the Lord.

Paul's ministry began more than thirty years ago on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-20). Now he was passing the baton of leadership to Timothy at a crucial time in the church's life. As Bible teacher William Barclay put it, "Paul, the aged warrior, is laying down his arms that Timothy may take them up" (*The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], p. 208). I believe Paul was saying, "Timothy, because death is imminent for me, there's a compelling call for you to take my place and be a faithful leader. If you do that, you'll triumph at the end, just as I have." Second Timothy 4:6-8 is Paul's final commentary, summary, and epitaph about his own life. In those verses he viewed his life from three perspectives:

Verse 6 looks at the present--the close of Paul's life--and reveals his readiness.

Verse 7 looks at the past--the course of Paul's life--and reveals his faithfulness.

Verse 8 looks at the future--the crown of Paul's life--and reveals his reward.

Paul's final words aren't to be mistaken for pride, for he always credited God's power as enabling him to minister: e. g. , "I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me" (Col. 1:29). By God's grace he was faithful in serving the Lord, thus it was only appropriate to close his life with a triumphant epitaph. Let's look more closely at his final words, for they are a powerful motivator for us to serve Christ as faithfully as he did.

LESSON

I. PAUL'S PRESENT LIFE (v. 6)

"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. "

A. His Implicit Statement About Death (v. 6a)

"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering. "

"For I" in verse 6 introduces a contrast to "but you" in verse 5. Timothy was to be sober, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, and fulfill his ministry (v. 5) because Paul was about to die (v. 6).

Being a successor to such a godly leader put Timothy into a special group of Bible persons. That group includes Joshua, who succeeded Moses as the leader of Israel (Josh. 1:1-2) and the prophet Elisha, the successor of Elijah (2 Kings 2:15).

"Already" (Gk. , *ede*) refers to something that's now occurring, so the sense of 2 Timothy 4:6 is: "I am leaving or departing now. " The word is used the same way of salvation in Romans 13:11, the mystery of iniquity in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, and the true light in 1 John 2:8. The Greek phrase translated "being poured out as a drink offering" (2 Tim. 4:6) is an allusion to an Old Testament sacrifice mentioned in Numbers 15.

In Numbers 15 the children of Israel were wandering in the desert under God's hand of judgment. The older generation eventually died there, but the Lord promised that the younger generation would enter the Promised Land. Since the new generation would continue to roam the desert for many years, God didn't want them to despair. So He taught them about the sacrifices that were to be offered in their new territory. They served as a present reminder about their future homeland.

1. Describing the sacrifice

a) Of a lamb This is what the Lord told Moses about the sacrifices: "When you enter the land where you are to live, which I am giving you, then make an offering by fire to the Lord, a burnt offering or a sacrifice to fulfill a special vow, or as a freewill offering or in your appointed times, to make a soothing aroma to the Lord, from the herd or from the flock. "And the one who presents his offering shall present to the Lord a grain offering of one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of oil, and you shall prepare wine for the libation, one-fourth of a hin, with the burnt offering or for the sacrifice, for each lamb" (Num. 15:1-5). A person would offer a lamb for a burnt offering, fine flour mixed in an oil base for a grain offering, and wine for a drink offering. The latter was to be poured out on the first two parts of the sacrifice. The conflagration of the sacrifice on the altar symbolized the worshiper's complete dedication to God (cf. Rom. 12:1). b) Of a larger animal For the sacrifice of a larger animal the grain and drink offerings were proportionately larger: "For a ram you shall prepare as a grain offering two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-third of a hin of oil; and for the libation you shall offer one-third of a hin of wine as a soothing aroma to the Lord. "And when you prepare a bull as a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a special vow, or for peace offerings to the Lord, then you shall offer with the bull a grain offering of three-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-half a hin of oil; and you shall offer as the libation one-half a hin of wine as an offering by fire, as a soothing aroma to the Lord. "Thus it shall be done for each ox, or for each ram, or for each of the male lambs, or of the goats. According to the number that you prepare, so you shall do for everyone according to their number" (vv. 6-12).

2. Identifying the worshiper

The Lord then identified who was allowed to offer the sacrifice: "All who are native shall do these things in this manner, in presenting an offering by fire, as a soothing aroma to the Lord. And if an alien sojourns with you, or one who may be among you throughout your generations, and he wishes to make an offering by fire, as a soothing aroma to the Lord, just as you do, so he shall do. As for the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the alien who sojourns with you, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as you are, so shall the alien be before the Lord. There is to be

one law and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you" (vv. 13-16). Both Israelites and non-Israelites were permitted to offer a sacrifice to the Lord.

Of the three parts to the sacrifice, the drink offering was the capstone, for it was the final act of sacrifice.

Paul saw his entire ministry as an offering to the Lord, for he said, "[I am] a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, that my offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:16). Perhaps he saw himself as the burnt offering, his ministry as the grain offering, and his death as the drink offering. Certainly the consummate act of his ministry, the final pouring out of his life, was literally fulfilled in his death: since Paul was a Roman citizen, his execution came by decapitation, not crucifixion.

This is what Paul said of the legal proceedings against him: "At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. But the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me, in order that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was delivered out of the lion's mouth. The Lord will deliver me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever" (2 Tim. 4:16-18).

Although Paul was the spiritual father of many Gentile believers, no one supported him at his trial before King Nero. Now Paul was incarcerated in a dungeon, waiting to reappear before the king and receive his final sentence of death.

B. His Explicit Statement About Death (v. 6b)

"The time of my departure has come. "

1. The nearness of death

The Greek term translated "time" (kairos) refers to a season rather than minutes, hours, or days. Paul sensed he had but a brief period of time before his actual death. That's why he told Timothy, "When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments" (2 Tim. 4:13) and "make every effort to come before winter" (v. 21). Perhaps he sensed his death would occur in winter.

The perfect tense "has come" shows that the clouds of death were now hovering about him and would continue to do so until his execution. The apostle Peter obviously experienced that same sense of impending death, for he said, "The laying aside of my earthly dwelling is imminent" (2 Pet. 1:14).

2. The pictures of death

Instead of being terrified by death, Paul viewed it as a "departure" (Gk. , *analsis*). His positive outlook reminds me of an African funeral custom. When a Christian dies, the people there say, "He's arrived," not "He's gone. " Furthermore, Barclay noted four ways that *analsis* pictures death (The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, p. 209) :

a) Loosening an animal from its yoke "It is the word for unyoking an animal from the shafts of the cart or the plough. Death to Paul was rest from toil. " He would be glad to lay the burden down. b)

Loosening a prisoner from his chains "It is the word for loosening bonds or fetters. Death for Paul was a release. He was to exchange the confines of a Roman prison for the glorious liberty of the courts of heaven. " Death would release Paul from the bondage of indwelling sin and set him free to enjoy the glorious liberty of righteousness. c) Loosening the ropes of a tent "It is the word for loosening the ropes of a tent. For Paul it was time to strike camp again. Many a journey he made across the roads of Asia Minor and of Europe. Now he was setting out on his last and greatest journey; he was taking the road that led to God. " Paul was a tentmaker by trade (Acts 18:3) , so he knew how to pull up stakes and break camp. Soon his own bodily tent would be taken down that he might embark on a heavenly journey. d) To loose the ropes from a ship "It is the word for loosening the mooring-ropes of a ship. Many a time Paul had felt his ship leave the harbour for the deep waters. Now he is to launch out into the greatest deep of all, setting sail to cross the waters of death to arrive in the haven of

eternity. " You secure a ship in its harbor by tying it to sturdy poles with rope. When it's time for the ship to leave harbor, the ropes are released. The ropes of Paul's earthly life would soon be let loose that he might set sail for the harbor of heaven. For us as Christians, death lays down our yoke of sin that we might receive our heavenly rest. Death lays aside our shackle of sin that we might be free from its presence. Death takes down our earthly tent that we might take up our heavenly residence. Death casts off our ropes of sin that we might set sail for heaven. Those pictorial truths give us all the more reason not to fear death (cf. 1 Cor. 15:55-57). I believe Paul faced death the same way Christ did. Jesus said, "No one has taken [my life] away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative" (John 10:18). As for Paul, he didn't avoid death by denying the faith or compromising his situation. He didn't become frustrated and ask, "How can this happen?" Rather, he willingly took up his cross by following Christ even to the point of death (cf. Matt. 16:24).

Dying with True Dignity

Paul considered it a privilege and honor not only to suffer for Christ, but also to die for Him. His attitude reminds me of Robert Browning's "Incident of the French Camp. " Browning's poem tells of a young soldier who hurriedly came from the battlefield to report victory to the French Emperor Napoleon. He was so exhilarated to report the good news and so honored to be chosen as the messenger that he was oblivious to his own severe wounds. Napoleon, upon noting them, exclaimed:

"You're wounded!" "Nay," the soldier's pride
Touched to the quick, he said:
"I'm killed, Sire!" And his chief beside,
Smiling the boy fell dead.

Paul spoke of the wounds he received in serving Christ: "I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). Those wounds were a testimony of Paul's willingness to accept even death for the cause of Christ. What about you? Are you willing to accept wounds or even death to serve as Christ would have you?

II. PAUL'S PAST LIFE (v. 7)

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. "

Verse 7 is a flashback of Paul's life. In the Greek text that is emphasized in two ways. First, the object of the sentence comes before the verb: "The good fight I have fought, the course I have finished, the faith I have kept. " Second, the perfect tense of the verbs speak of actions completed in the past with results continuing into the present.

Paul looked back on his life without any sense of regret, sadness, or unfulfillment. Let's learn from his triumphant epitaph that we might do the same!

Focusing on the Facts

1. What did Paul's final words convey in 2 Timothy 4:6-8?
2. Paul was a shepherd of God's flock. Approximately how long did he minister?
3. What were two of Paul's concerns about the church?
4. What three perspectives does 2 Timothy 4:6-8 represent?
5. Why aren't Paul's final words to be mistaken for pride (Col. 1:29)?
6. What is the significance of the phrase translated "for I" in 2 Timothy 4:6?
7. In what way is Timothy like Joshua and Elisha?
8. Summarize how Numbers 15 relates to Paul's "drink offering" in 2 Timothy 4:6.
9. How was Paul strengthened while facing imminent death (2 Tim. 4:16-18)?
10. What is the meaning of "time" in 2 Timothy 4:6?

11. What is the significance of "has come" in 2 Timothy 4:6?
12. What are four ways that analysis pictures death? How do those pictures apply to you as a Christian?
13. In what sense did Paul face death like Christ?
14. What were Paul's wounds a testimony of?
15. Second Timothy 4:7 is a _____ of Paul's life.
16. In what sense did Paul look back on his life?

Pondering the Principles

1. Paul was willing to suffer and die to serve Christ. His attitude is reminiscent of Henry Lyte's hymn "Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken":

Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee;
Destitute, despised, forsaken, Thou, from hence, my all shalt be:
Perish every fond ambition, all I've sought, and hoped, and known;
Yet how rich is my condition, God and heaven are still my own!
Haste thee on from grace to glory, armed by faith and winged by prayer;
Heaven's eternal day's before thee, God's own hand shall guide thee there.
Soon shall close thy earthly mission, swift shall pass thy pilgrim days,
Hope shall change to glad fruition, faith to sight, and prayer to praise.

With that in mind, read and meditate on 2 Corinthians 5:1-9. Commune with God over the truths in that passage.

2. In his book *Dying Thoughts* the Puritan Richard Baxter, a preacher for over forty years, wrote, "Many serious Christians, through the weakness of their trust in God, live in this perplexed strait, weary of living and afraid of dying, continually pressed between grief and fear. But Paul's strait was between two joys, which of them he should desire most. And if that be my case, what should much interrupt my peace or pleasure? If I live, it is for Christ, for his service. . . . If I die presently, it is my gain; God, who appoints me my work, limits my time; and surely his glorious reward can never be unseasonable, or come too soon, if it be the time that he appoints" ([Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976], pp. 19-20). Can you say with Paul, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21) ? Ask the Lord to help you have a biblical attitude toward life and death.

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