

The Triumphant Epitaph of Paul, Part 2

Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:7

Code: 55-25

INTRODUCTION

Years ago President Theodore Roosevelt gave this penetrating call to commitment: "It's not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man 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 try to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly. Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checked by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in a gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat" (cf. Hamilton Club speech on the strenuous life, Chicago, 10 Apr. 1899).

Certainly the apostle Paul didn't live in a gray twilight, for his life reflected great commitment and courage as he ministered triumphantly on behalf of Christ. Now he was calling Timothy to follow in his steps.

Second Timothy 4:6-8 is Paul's final summary of his Christian life. He was now in prison and knew death was imminent. But his attitude was not one of fear or regret, but of triumph. And I believe his longing was for all Christians to have a triumphant epitaph.

REVIEW

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

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

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

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

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

LESSON

That verse is a flashback that summarizes Paul's ministry and reveals his faithfulness to the Lord. The perfect-tense verbs show that he fought the good fight, continued the course, and kept the faith all along the way. He looked back on his life without any sense of unfulfillment because he knew he accomplished all that God had called and equipped him to do. We can do the same by following Paul's example in verse 7. Five principles stand out.

A. He Recognized the Spiritual Struggle (v. 7a)

"I have fought the good fight. "

The Greek term translated "fought" (agonizomai, from which we derive agony) refers to a struggle and pictures a contest requiring the expenditure of great effort or energy. The Bible uses the analogies of a track meet (1 Cor. 9:24) , a boxing match (v. 26) , and a wrestling meet (Eph. 6:12) to describe such an effort. To be victorious, a believer must recognize that he or she is engaged in a spiritual struggle.

Bible scholar William Hendricksen described Paul's spiritual struggle like this: "It had been a fight against Satan; against the principalities and powers, the world-rulers of this darkness in the

heavenlies; against Jewish and pagan vice and violence; against Judaism among the Galatians; against fanaticism among the Thessalonians; against contention, fornication, and litigation among the Corinthians; against incipient Gnosticism among the Ephesians and Colossians; against fightings without and fears within; and last but not least, against the law of sin and death operating within his own heart" (Exposition of Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957], p. 315). All Christians are engaged in spiritual warfare that requires maximum effort and commitment. Anything less reflects an apathetic attitude toward the cause of Christ. Paul labored to the point of exhaustion (Col. 1:29) and said believers will suffer on Christ's behalf (Phil 1:29-30). Serving the Lord requires labor and effort, not part-time indulgence.

B. He Recognized the Nobility of the Cause (v. 7a)

"I have fought the good fight. "

"Good" (Gk. , kalos) can be translated "beautiful, useful," or "excellent," but my favorite translation is "noble. " For Paul the noblest cause was serving Christ. However, that's not true for all believers since many "seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:21).

Paul was so consumed with advancing Christ's kingdom that he said, "Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:7-8). Rather than rest on his impressive earthly credentials, Paul forsook all to follow Christ. Timothy did the same, for Paul said, "He is doing the Lord's work, as I also am" (1 Cor. 16:10).

God calls all believers to the noble cause of serving as "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20). Since ours is a heavenly and holy calling, we should never rest or let our guard down while engaged in the spiritual struggle. Instead we are to run the race with courage. And it has been well said that courage is fear that has said its prayers.

Examine your own life and ask, Am I truly serving Christ? How has God gifted and equipped me? Am I devoting my time, energy, and talents for the cause of Christ or have I been wasting my life on trivial things?

C. He Recognized the Need to Stay on Course (v. 7b)

"I have finished the course. "

Although many believers start out on the right course, they eventually become diverted from the track God originally set them on. When a believer is born into God's kingdom his race begins, and when he enters God's presence his race ends. The interval between is the time he has to complete his spiritual course. If he strays from his course he loses valuable time. The only way to complete the course within the allotted time is to stay on course.

The Greek term translated "course" (dromos) pictures an athletic race (cf. Acts 20:24; 1 Cor. 9:27). In running his spiritual race the believer is to "lay aside every encumbrance" (Heb. 12:1) , which refers to any unnecessary weight or baggage. When competing in a race, a runner doesn't wear an overcoat or carry luggage. Similarly, the believer is to discard anything that impedes him from doing his best and finishing his course. That obviously includes sin, but could also include things that are not.

Our toughest battle in the Christian life is to stay on course, and that requires self-discipline. Such discipline was manifested by the early church. In Acts 6 the twelve apostles said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. . . . But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (vv. 2, 4). Paul 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 which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).

Since Christ is the perfect example of One who stayed on course, we are to fix "our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith" (Heb. 12:2). Christ was always mindful of doing His Father's will: "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:38).

We should follow Christ because He is perfect in holiness and "without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Focusing on our spiritual course can be a difficult thing to do. Peter, for example, became distracted over God's plan for the apostle John (John 21:18-23). And I believe many Christians are distracted from what God has called and gifted them to do. They want to run their own course because they fear the self-discipline that God's course requires.

The Essence of Self-Discipline

I believe Rudyard Kipling's "If--" expresses the essence of a disciplined life:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too,
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:
If you can dream--and not make dreams your master;
If you can think--and not make thoughts our aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same.
If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and- toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss.
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings--nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And--which is more--you'll be a Man, my son!
Exercise self-discipline and run God's course!

The Baseball Focus

Ted Williams was a great baseball player. When he was ready to hit the ball, it was said that players sometimes threw firecrackers at his feet to distract him. But because of his tremendous ability to concentrate and focus on the ball he didn't even hear them go off! Similarly, in the spiritual realm we must have a biblical focus to stay on course.

D. He Recognized the Need to Treasure Time (v. 7b)

"I have finished the course. "

As a believer you have a limited time to finish your spiritual race. In a sense you are running against the clock just like at a track meet. So make "the most of your time, because the days are evil" (Eph. 5:16). We must see time for what it truly is: a treasure God gives us.

Paul finished his course because he used his time wisely. William Barclay gave this illustration: "The Battle of Marathon was one of the decisive battles of the world. In it the Greeks met the Persians, and, if the Persians had conquered, the glory that was Greece would never have flowered upon the

world. Against fearful odds the Greeks won the victory, and, after the battle, a Greek soldier ran all the way, day and night, to Athens with the news. Straight to the magistrates he ran. 'Rejoice,' he gasped, 'we have conquered,' and even as he delivered his message he fell dead. He had completed his course and done his work, and there is no finer way for any man to die" (The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], pp. 210-11).

Today's marathon race is a tribute to that faithful soldier. Its distance is supposed to be the same as what he ran. As Christians we are to make the most of our time in delivering God's divine message (cf. Rom. 10:14).

Our responsibility to treasure time reminds me of what my track coach said years ago: "If you have anything left ten yards past the finish line, you didn't give your all. " Realizing our time is so short, we should give no less than our best to the Lord.

E. He Recognized the Fulfillment of a Sacred Trust (v. 7c)

"I have kept the faith. "

Paul recognized he was fulfilling a sacred trust-- God's Word. It was the controlling element in everything he did, and should be for us as well. We are to fight the good fight, realize the nobility of the cause, run with self-discipline, finish our spiritual race, and value time as a treasure because God's Word tells us to.

In verse 7 "the faith" refers to the revealed Word of God, and "I have kept" (Gk. , tereo) means "to guard. " We are to run the race obeying and proclaiming God's Word, but never compromising its truth. That's why Paul told Timothy, "Guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called 'knowledge'" (1 Tim. 6:20) and "guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you" (2 Tim. 1:14).

As Christians we are to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). We are to guard God's Word even in the midst of hostile opposition because it's the treasure of all treasures.

The Little Blind Girl Who Loved God's Word

A missionary in France told of a little French girl who became a believer. Although she had been blind from birth, she knew how to read Braille. Someone gave her the gospel of Mark in Braille, and she loved it so much that she eventually developed calluses on her fingers from reading it so often. Those calluses meant she no longer could read.

Hoping to make her fingers more sensitive, she peeled the skin from the end of her fingers. But instead her fingers became permanently scarred. Believing she would never read again, she bent down to give the pages of God's Word a farewell kiss. As she did, she soon realized that her lips were more sensitive than her fingers. She then learned how to read God's Word with her lips.

Do you desire to have a love for the Word like that? Your Christian life is a direct reflection of how you view the treasure of God's Word.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What did the life of the apostle Paul reflect?
2. Why didn't Paul have any sense of unfulfillment?
3. What does "fought" refer to in 2 Timothy 4:7?
4. Describe Paul's spiritual struggle.
5. Spiritual warfare requires maximum _____ and _____ .
6. What does Philippians 1:29-30 teach?
7. What was the noblest cause for Paul? Why isn't that true for all believers (Phil. 2:21)?
8. God calls all believers to the noble cause of serving as " for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20).
9. Because your calling is heavenly and holy, what should you never do?

10. What is the only way to complete your course?
11. According to Hebrews 12:1 what is the believer to lay aside? Why?
12. In what way did the apostles manifest self-discipline (Acts 6:2, 4; 20:24)?
13. What was Christ always mindful of (John 6:38)?
14. Why do many believers want to run their own course instead of God's?
15. What does Ephesians 5:16 teach?
16. What is to be the controlling element in everything we do?

Pondering the Principles

1. Hebrews 12:1-2 says, "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. " Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "We cannot change circumstances, but we can triumph in them. We can be 'more than conquerors'; and we become so as we are found 'looking unto Jesus'. Look at Him! Look at the nights He spent in prayer, look at His knowledge of the Word of God, look at the way in which He 'exercised His senses'. . . . We must become imitators of Him. We must look beyond men, we must look to the Son of God and what He has done in order 'to save us out of this present evil world', and to introduce us to the glory that awaits us with God" (The Christian Soldier [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977], pp. 93-94). Stay on course and finish your spiritual race by looking to Christ.
2. You are to fight "the good fight" (2 Tim. 4:7; emphasis added). Take comfort from these words of English minister J. C. Ryle, who explains why it is good: "Let us settle it in our minds that the Christian fight is a good fight--really good, truly good, emphatically good. We see only part of it yet. We see the struggle, but not the end; we see the campaign, but not the reward; we see the cross, but not the crown. We see a few humble, broken-spirited, penitent, praying people, enduring hardships and despised by the world; but we see not the hand of God over them, the face of God smiling on them, the kingdom of glory prepared for them. These things are yet to be revealed. Let us not judge by appearances. There are more good things about the Christian warfare than we see" (Holiness [Hertfordshire, Eng. : Evangelical Press, 1989], p. 62).

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