

Fight the Good Fight

6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.

16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 17 But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion’s mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

After Paul’s third Mission trip, during which he wrote 1-2 Corinthians and Romans, he was arrested and imprisoned and eventually sent to Rome for judgment and sentencing. He was shipwrecked on the way off the island of Malta, but finally arrived in Rome. This is how the book of Acts ends. But from other passages in Scripture, we know that Paul was released and seems to have taken a 4th missionary journey, perhaps including a trip to Spain. But in about 66 or 67, he was arrested again and in the same year that Peter and his wife were, according to tradition, executed in Rome, Paul, too, met his end. But shortly before that, he wrote this last letter. “The time,” he said, “for my departure is near.”

He had trouble during those final months. In his first appearance—and this may have been before Caesar or before some other high-ranking Roman official—nobody stood up for Paul. Everybody disappeared. Oh—One man, Onesiphorus, searched and searched all through the prisons until he found Paul. But Paul had sent some of his companions like Titus to preach in other places, but Luke the physician was still with him. He wrote to Timothy to bring him his copies of the books of the Bible, and his warm cloak, and mostly just to see his friend Timothy once again.

Here, as everywhere, we see God’s law and gospel at work, even in this stony dungeon beneath the streets of Rome. There is the problem of the ones who deserted Paul. We aren’t going to make any assumptions about them. Paul says to us and in a prayer, “May it not be held against them.” Isn’t this a version of “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”?¹ Paul intercedes for them, and teaches us to do the same when we might be

deserted or abandoned in our work, especially in the work of the gospel, and most especially in a time of danger.

Paul knew that he wasn't alone. The Lord was standing by his side and giving him strength. Thirty years before this, when Paul had been famous for attacking Christians, tearing families apart, having people arrested, and even for having Christians killed, the Lord Jesus had appeared to Paul while he was on his way to Damascus. This changed his life. We went from the greatest enemy of the church to its greatest champion. He spent the rest of his life in the service of the Word of God.

Now that service had led Paul to the heart of the Roman Empire, to Rome itself in Italy, to the court of Caesar, of Nero. Paul had many strange pulpits during his ministry, and Nero's court must have been one of the more bizarre places to proclaim Christ. But Paul says that the message of Christ was fully proclaimed to the Gentiles through him.

But now that work was done. Paul thinks about the end of his life approaching in a couple of ways. First, when the Israelites made sacrifices on the altar, they also brought wine, a third of a hin, which would be more than one of our quarts or liters. This was poured out around the base of the altar. When all the wine was poured out, the offering was done; there was nothing more to do. Paul's life and ministry were at an end; there was nothing more for him to do.

But Paul was also a fan of sports; he has fought a fight; he was won a race, and like a victorious athlete, he has prize waiting. Athletes didn't get gold or silver medals in Paul's time, the winner got a wreath of leaves. Our names Steven and Stephany come from the word for that wreath. Paul had ended his life as an unbeliever with the killing of a Christian man named Stephen, and now Paul was ending his life as a believer, by receiving a "stephanos," a victory wreath, from Christ.

But, Paul says, this isn't just for him. It's for everyone who has put their faith in Jesus, for "all who have longed for his appearing."

Paul says, "I have kept the faith." What does this mean? Does he mean that he has kept believing through all of his troubles, or does he mean that he has personally preserved the gospel and its meaning so that Christians don't get mixed up and confused about the role of Jesus in our salvation, and fall from faith?

Surely you and I have these same two struggles. Paul knew, and he had learned directly from Jesus, that apart from faith in Christ we are lost. Paul used to be a Pharisee, a kind of a Jewish

¹ Luke 23:34

believer who put all of his religion into being, personally, a visibly righteous man. Look at me! I'm leading a godly life! I dress in a certain way, I don't trim the sides of my beard, I make sure that I'm in the synagogue every single Sabbath day, and I will even make sure that you know that I'm there. And look at the offerings I make and the big deal I make out of it!

But none of those actions, nothing in that attitude, benefits the soul. If a Pharisee's goal in worship is to be seen, then that Pharisee has everything all wrong. Our goal in worship should be to hear, to see, to listen, to worship. If I need to be up in front to hear better, then that's okay. If I do well to blend in with the middle of the group or sit in the back, then that's okay, too. If I'd rather be in the balcony, or behind the glass with the ushers, that's okay, too, because we're here to listen, to learn.

And we all need to be vigilant about preserving the doctrine of the church. How can I do that, pastor, when I don't know all the ins and outs of doctrine, when I'm not always sure myself? Well, the beginning of that is to know the basics and to treat those things like the very floor that you walk on. If I don't trust this floor, I'm not about to put in cabinets, or bring a piano in here, or a sink or whatever it might be. What do I build on in doctrine? What are the basics of my faith? The Catechism. The Catechism teaches me what the Bible says about itself, what God's holy will is for mankind: that's the Ten Commandments. That's also how we know we've sinned. But the Catechism teaches me how I'm saved, through Jesus my Savior (this is the Creed) and how he gives us faith and forgiveness through the sacraments. We also want to learn about prayer, because that's how we approach God's holy throne with what's on our minds and what's in our hearts.

So to "keep the faith," I keep believing in all of God's promises and his word. But it also means that I preserve all God's teaching by gladly hearing it, reading it, remembering it, and talking about it. Preserving the faith and believing are interconnected. We do both, all the time. Believing in Jesus is remembering that my sins are forgiven, paid for on the cross, and proved by the resurrection.

Paul was not going to be around forever. That's why he wrote this letter. When I was fifteen, my mom showed me how to make hospital corners, and fold fitted sheets, and what temperature to wash different loads of laundry in, and a whole host of housekeeping things. She kept saying, all summer, "I'm not always going to be here to show you this." She died that August of cancer. Paul had something to share with Timothy that my mom had always shared with me: The Word of God. Even if I'm not always going to be here to help you find answers, God's Word is eternal. It will be here to help you to escape despair among your many afflictions. Trust in the forgiveness of Jesus, and in all of God's holy word. Amen.