

Passing the Torch "Faithful to the End" 2 Timothy 4:6-27

Introduction

Today is the final message of our series in 2 Timothy on "Passing the Torch." Paul is writing from the damp, dark Mamertine Prison in Rome. He pens his final message to his young protégé Timothy to encourage him to continue in the work of the Lord after his death. Paul is very conscious that his journey of faith is coming to a close, and he is intent on passing the torch to the next generation.

The fourth chapter ends with the curtain closing on the life of one of the most significant 1st-century disciples, the Apostle Paul. What happened next has been debated for centuries. It seems most likely that soon after Paul sent this letter to Timothy, the Emperor Nero beheaded him. These words reflect what was on his mind at the end of his life.

His greatest concern was for the devoted disciples he would leave behind. He wants Timothy to be there for his final court appearance, which was sure to pronounce the end of his earthly life. So, he writes, "Be diligent to come to me quickly." Above everything else, he wanted Timothy to come to see him in prison before he died. Timothy is in Ephesus, hundreds of miles away, so it would take a couple of months for him to come to Rome.

Several of Paul's supporters had deserted him, and the aged apostle longed to see his young friend one final time before his death. Paul wanted Timothy to know he remained faithful to the end. In verse 6, Paul writes, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (2Ti 4:6-7 NKJV)

Paul says that his life was already being poured out as a drink offering. The drink offering was a sign of God's faithfulness to His covenant with Israel. In the Old Testament, the drink offering symbolized the works a worshiper offered on behalf of the suffering of others. While Paul refers to his impending death, he probably sees the struggles and sufferings of his apostolic ministry as a libation poured out in sacrificial service for the churches where he ministered.

The drink offering was an offering of wine usually poured over an animal sacrifice offered to God upon the altar. It has a beautiful application for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The drink offering is a metaphor for the blood Jesus spilled on the cross. Jesus referred to this directly in Luke 22:20 when He instituted the New Covenant. He picked up a cup of wine and said, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood." Paul also uses the image of the drink offering to describe his sacrifice on behalf of the churches he started.

The first drink offering is recorded in Genesis 35 when Jacob pours out a drink offering to God for sparing his life when he goes to meet his brother Esau. When Israel entered the Promised Land, the drink became part of the sacrificial system. When the wine was poured upon an animal sacrifice, the smoke would rise from the altar as a sweet-smelling savor to God.

Paul was also a witness to the Roman drink offering. Every Roman meal ended with the sacrificial ritual of pouring out a cup of wine to their gods. Even the Romans would understand Paul saying, "My time has come, my purpose is complete, I am ready to be poured out to God."

Paul viewed his life as a sacrifice poured out to honor and glorify God. These final words from Paul to Timothy are even more meaningful because Paul knew he was passing the torch to Timothy. Now it was up to Timothy to carry the torch. If Jesus tarries, God's workmen will pass on, but God's work must continue through those to whom the torch is passed.

The word "departure" in verse six gives us three word pictures. First, it pictures a ship hoisting the anchor, raising the sails, leaving the harbor, and setting sail for some distant port. Secondly, it pictures an army that has made camp near a battlefield but decides to break camp, leave the battlefield, and head for home. And thirdly, the root word of departure was a legal term referring to a release from a binding contract.

Paul views his impending death as a release from his contract of earthly service to Christ. He had finished the work for which he was called. Paul had no feelings of despair. He felt only divine assurance that the best part of life – his heavenly life was about to begin. He declares he has fought the good fight and finished the race.

Throughout his ministry, Paul used athletes and races as a picture of being a faithful Christian to the very end of life. Now he knew his race was ending, and a crown of righteousness awaited him.

I. A Crown of Righteousness

Paul included all those who are faithful to the end. He says if you remain faithful to the end, you will receive a crown of righteousness. Look at verse 8, "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing." (2Ti 4:8 NKJV)

Paul was confident he would receive a crown when he reached heaven and he was ready to receive it. Before Paul became a Christian, he opposed those who followed Christ and even supervised the execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. But now, having given his life to Christ and facing the end of his life, he knew he would finish well.

"In 1904 William Borden, heir to the Borden Dairy Estate graduated from a Chicago high school as a millionaire. His parents gave him a trip around the world. Traveling through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe gave Borden a burden for the world's hurting people. Writing home, he said, "I'm going to give my life to prepare for the mission field." When he made this decision, he wrote in the back of his Bible two words: No Reserves. Turning down high paying job offers after graduation from Yale University, he entered two more words in his Bible: No Retreats. Completing studies at Princeton Seminary, Borden sailed for China to work with Muslims, stopping first at Egypt for some preparation. While there, he was stricken with cerebral meningitis and died within a month. Many said, "His was a wasted life." But not in God's plan. In his Bible underneath the words No Reserves and No Retreats, he had written the words No Regrets."

Those who remain faithful to God to the end of their life will receive the crown of righteousness. William Borden will be there along with so many others who remained faithful to the end. Hebrews 12:1 says, "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb 12:1-2 NKJV)

Paul includes all of those who have remained faithful over the years and waited for Christ's appearance.

II. Faithful When Forsaken

Some who start out in faith don't remain faithful to the end. In verse 9, Paul mentions those who failed to remain faithful to him and to Christ. Paul writes, "Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments." (2Ti 4:9-13 NIV)

We all need companionship and encouragement. Have you ever felt all alone? Paul may have been experiencing some loneliness as he writes that Demas has left him. It seems Demas left because he chose the love of the world over devotion to Christ. Others left Paul out of necessity like Crescens and Titus. And still others like Tychicus, Paul had sent on a mission, probably to Ephesus so that Timothy could come to Rome.

In his letter to Philemon and the Colossians, Paul describes Demas as a fellow worker. But in the end, Demas abandoned his faith and forsook Paul. Losing Demas was painful for Paul. Have you ever been betrayed by someone you considered a close friend? It is a wound that leaves you in great pain.

Only Luke stayed on with Paul. Luke had traveled with Paul on many of his missionary journeys and remained committed to Paul to the very end. Everyone else was gone, which was a significant contrast to Paul's first imprisonment ten years before when he received many visitors (Acts 28: 30-31).

Paul tells Timothy to go get John Mark and bring him with you. After their first missionary journey, Paul wanted nothing more to do with Mark. (Acts 15: 36-40) John Mark's fainthearted departure from the mission team really frustrated Paul. Later, when John Mark again wanted to travel with them, Paul emphatically refused. The disagreement between Barnabas and Paul over John Mark was so strong that the two parted company. Yet now, many years later, Mark had managed to regain Paul's respect. John Mark is a testament to anyone who has previously failed but has turned things around and experienced restoration. Past failures do not mean you can never be used again in the Lord's work. Demas has forsaken the faith, but Mark has fully embraced it, and Paul wants to see him again. It is a beautiful picture of how Christian restoration should work. Don't write people off forever! When you see they've changed, and grown, embrace them, and restore them in fellowship.

When Paul met Jesus he gave up everything to follow him. At the end of his life all he owned was a cloak and a few books. It's noteworthy that Paul stayed a reader and scholar to the end. He tells Timothy that he especially wanted him to bring the portions of the Old Testament he called the parchments.

III. Faithful When Challenged

In verse 14, Paul warns Timothy to beware of those who personally attack you for your faith in Jesus. He writes, "Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message. At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them." (2Ti 4: 14-16 NIV)

In 1 Timothy 1: 20, Paul names Alexander as someone whose faith had suffered shipwreck. In this second letter, Paul warns Timothy about this same man. He says, "Alexander did me much harm," – suggesting he might also oppose Timothy. So he tells him, "You should also beware of him." Some scholars say that Alexander may have been the informer who betrayed Paul to the Roman government and was responsible for his final imprisonment.

Alexander may have been a witness against Paul at his arrest. William Barclay says, "Informers were one of the great curses of Rome at this time. And it may well be that Alexander was a renegade Christian, who went to the magistrates with false information against Paul, seeking to ruin him in the most dishonorable way." Paul says, "May the Lord repay him according to his works." Alexander's judgment would be simple. It's a terrible thing to be judged according to your works. When we stand before God in the final judgment, I want to be judged according to my faith in Jesus Christ, not my works! Hello?

Look at verse 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. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen." (2Ti 4:17-18 NIV)

At one point, Paul was all alone, but he says Jesus stood by him and helped him served God faithfully during his first defense. Paul was not bitter that so many forsook him. He says, "May it not be charged against them." He demonstrates convincing evidence his life was a great work of grace and spiritual maturity.

Many times God had delivered Paul from death, and he gives Him all the praise and glory even though he knows this time he will face martyrdom. Even in death, Paul demonstrates remarkable optimism and joy. Remember, even if all your friends desert you, God has promised he never will. He will always be there for you.

In the last moments of his life, Paul was penniless, friendless, and possessionless. Yet, he knew a heavenly reward awaited him, and he would not trade places with anyone else.

Conclusion

Paul closes in verse 19 by saying, "Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus stayed in Corinth, but Trophimus I have left in Miletus sick. Do your utmost to come before winter. Eubulus greets you, as well as Pudens, Linus, Claudia, and all the brethren. The Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Grace be with you. Amen." (2Ti 4:19-22 NKJV)

In his parting words, Paul's heart reaches out to the people he knew. He was still thinking of others rather than himself. Paul knew the nature of Jesus was to be an others-centered person.

He also adds, "Trophimus I have left in Miletus sick." I find it very interesting that Paul was used many times by God to perform remarkable miracles of healing. Yet he leaves Trophimus behind because he is sick. Paul was used of God many times to administer healing to people, but he did not possess miraculous powers to use at his own discretion. Holy Spirit gifts of healing can only be used in God's will and timing.

Spurgeon is known to have preached a whole sermon on "The Sick Man Left Behind." His points out that God allows even good men to be in ill health and that sometimes circumstances prevent a person from completing their mission. And finally, the Lord's work must move forward even when his ministers cannot.

As He closes, Paul senses the urgency of the hour. He writes, "Do your utmost to come before winter." There is so much heart and emotion behind these words. We don't know if Paul ever got to see Timothy again, but I'll bet Timothy did his utmost

to get there before winter. The Mamertine prison, where Paul spent his final days, was built to house Rome's political enemies. Tradition holds that Paul was beheaded outside Rome's Ostian Gate at a place called "Three Fountains."

We find the last words from Paul's pen in verse 22, "The Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Grace be with you. Amen."

(2Ti 4:22 NKJV)

It seems that Paul invites Timothy to affirm the Lord's work with an agreeing, "amen." Paul had fulfilled his ministry and is ready to receive his reward, and he wants to make sure Timothy will do the same. Every person must face a final test of faith. The question is, "How will you face yours?"