

## The Epitaph of a Faithful Preacher

Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:6–8

Code: 80-271

As we come this morning to the time to worship the Lord by the hearing of His Word – which is really the heart of all worship - for all worship is praise and gratitude offered to God for who He is and what He has done, which, of course, are revealed in Scripture, therefore the foundation of all worship is found in the Word of God.

As we bring our Shepherds' Conference to its conclusion, my heart is drawn to my ministry model, my hero, the apostle Paul. While I certainly want to follow Christ, I have learned through my life to follow Paul who followed Christ. He said, "Be followers of me as I am of Christ."

You who know me know how beloved Paul is to me and what an example he sets for my own life and ministry. And I'm drawn, for this morning, as we draw this conference to a conclusion, to the last words of Paul at the end of his life. Turn in your Bible, if you will, to 2 Timothy chapter 4. Second Timothy chapter 4.

This is the last chapter that he ever wrote, and I'm drawn just to three verses, his own epitaph, verses 6 through 8. Before I look at those verses, I just want to comment that the words of dying men tend to be stripped of all hypocrisy. The words of dying men tend to reveal the heart, what's really there.

Napoleon, on his deathbed, said, "I die before my time, and my body will be given back to earth to become the food of worms. Such is the fate which so soon awaits the great Napoleon."

It was Mahatma Gandhi who said, at the edge of his death, "My days are numbered. For the first time in 50 years, I find myself in a slough of despond. All about me is darkness. I am praying for light." Interesting that the phrase "slough of despond" comes from *Pilgrim's Progress* which he had read but not believed.

It was Talleyrand who wrote on a paper left beside his bedside, found after his death, "What cares! What agitation! What anxieties! What ill will! What sad complications! And all without other results except great fatigue of mind and body and a profound sentiment of discouragement with regard to the future and disgust with regard to the past!" What a way to die.

There are better ways to die than that. I remember, as a little boy, visiting Christ's Church in Philadelphia, and wandering through that church and finding the gravestone of Benjamin Franklin. I cannot vouch for the purity of his religion, but I really liked his epitaph – so much so that I memorized it, and it stuck with me, "Here lies the body of Franklin, like an old book, stripped of its lettering and gilding, it lies here, food for worms. But the work shall not be lost, for I will appear once more, in a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected by the Author."

Listen to Paul's epitaph. He, like Franklin, wrote his own. Verse 6, "I'm 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."

I want to take you not to the next years of your ministry; I want to take you to the end of your life. I want you to think about what the epitaph will be. Here are the words of God's greatest servant among men. Here is his own epitaph, his own personal assessment of his life. He is on the brink of death; he knows that. His trial is passed; his sentence was death. His execution is imminent. He knows his present imprisonment will be the last location for his life, and he is inexorably on the way to martyrdom.

I suppose by human standards it's not a good time to leave. I am confident there would never be a good time for the apostle Paul to leave. I am sure that far and wide, among believers in the early church, there was such a deep and profound love and affection for this apostle that they would wish that he would never leave. And after all, everybody who was in the kingdom of God, in the Gentile world, was able to trace their lineage back to the ministry of the apostle Paul. They were all indebted to him.

And who could ever replace him? He was the last of the apostles, and there is no apostolic succession. So, when he goes, there is no replacement. And he, of course, had that firsthand experience with Jesus on several occasions, having a personal audience with the risen Christ, starting on the Damascus Road. There was nobody like him, and yet there was a time when he had to go.

And not only was it seemingly an inappropriate time in general, but it was even an inappropriate time in specific, because, for example, the church at Ephesus, where Timothy was pastoring at this time, had fallen upon very hard times. There was defection in that church which Paul himself had started. There was deviation from the truth. There was corrupt leadership leading people astray, which he addresses in the first letter to Timothy. There was an abandonment of the pursuit of holy things so that they were erring on the side of doctrine and conduct. That's why he left Timothy there with the hope that Timothy would set it all right.

But instead, the difficulty of the circumstance in the church and outside the church – in the church was resistance; outside the church was persecution – the difficulty of that was causing Timothy to begin to waver.

And as you go back to the beginning of this letter, if you'll look at chapter 1 and verse 5, Paul says, "I am mindful of the sincere faith within you." That's an interesting statement. That's like writing a letter to somebody and starting out by saying, "Dear friend, I know you're a Christian, but..." I mean why would he even bring this up? Why would he have to be reminded that Timothy was in the faith unless there was certain things happening that might call that into question?

He says, "I'm sure" – at the end of verse 5 – "I'm sure the true faith is in you, and it is for this reason that I remind you" – verse 6 – "to stir up, kindle afresh, the gift of God." You have a gift for preaching

and ministry which was affirmed by the elders of the church; stir it up. Paul was rightly concerned because Timothy had allowed his gift to fall into disuse; too much pressure on the inside, too much persecution on the outside, and he was beginning to collapse under that.

And then in verse 7, we get an idea of why he was collapsing, “God has not given us a spirit of cowardice” – that’s what the word means. This is very serious. Not only would it be serious enough for Paul, the last of the apostles, to leave. Not only would the lost be absolutely beyond comprehension, not only would the place of Paul be unable to be taken by anybody, but the best opportunity was in the hands of Timothy, who was the personal disciple of Paul, and here is Timothy waning so severely that Paul says to him, “Don’t be a coward; keep doing what you’ve been gifted to do.” And then, in verse 8, adds the amazing statement, “Don’t be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord.” Cowardice, shame, failure to use your gift.

And then down in verse 13 he says, “Retain the standard of sound doctrine.” One of the temptations, when you’re under persecution and when you’re resisted inside the church, is to change our doctrine, is to compromise to bring some ease to the pressure. Don’t do that.

Verse 14, he says, “Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.” And then in verse 15, he says, “Everybody else in Asia has turned away from me,” and the implication is, “Are you going to be the next one?” Now, this is very strong language and strong insight into the condition of the church at Ephesus and the heart of Timothy.

Timothy was the guy to get the baton from Paul. He was next in line to lead not only that church but to be an example, and a leader, and a shepherd to the other churches. And he’s marginal at this time. And that’s why in chapter 2, verse 1, he says, “You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Be a soldier, he says, and be an athlete, in verse 5, and be a hardworking farmer in verse 6. And verse 15, “And be a diligent workman.” And verse 21, “Be a vessel for honor and flee youthful lusts. And verse 24, “Be a slave of the Lord.” Don’t give in, don’t fail, don’t compromise.

Now in chapter 3, verse 14, he says, “Continue in the things you’ve learned.” Remember, in verse 16, that, “The Scripture is inspired by God and it’s profitable.” And in chapter 4, verse 2, “Preach the Word.” See, this whole epistle is an attempt by the apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to infuse strength into a weakened Timothy. I’m saying all that simply to say that if Paul could have picked his time to go, from the human perspective, from the way things looked in the church at Ephesus and in the life of Timothy, this would not have been the optimum moment.

But nonetheless – and this is, I think, so wonderful – there is in what I just read you, in verses 6 to 8, there is a quietness, there is a confidence as Paul lays down his arms for Timothy to take them up, he confronts Timothy boldly; he confronts Timothy eloquently. And yet, there is a triumphant victory in what he says, as he sums up his life, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I’ve kept the faith; I am ready to go.”

You can only do what you can do. And when your life is over; it’s over. You can’t control the next generation. You can’t control the next scene. You can’t determine what will happen when you’re gone.

From a human standpoint, it wouldn't seem like an optimum time to go, with the Ephesian church wavering as it was, and it

Proved to be a legitimate concern, because by the time the book of Revelation is written and our Lord gives a letter to the church at Ephesus, that church has left its first love, and the Lord says, "I'm going to take the candlestick away; I'm going to obliterate the church," and He did. Plenty of reason for concern.

So, from the human viewpoint, Paul could see enough of the drift to know that the future didn't look very secure. And yet, he faces death triumphantly, being able to look over his life and say, "I did what you asked me to do; that's all I can do. I can't guarantee the future; I can't guarantee the successor; I can only do what I was given to do."

Now, as we look at this epitaph, I just want you to see he views his life from the three perspectives: the present, the past, and the future. This is a man at the end, just looking across all of it, from start to finish. He looks at the present and the close of his life. He looks at the past and the course of his life. He looks at the future and the crown of his life. And he is doing this here not just by way of information but by way of motivation for Timothy.

There's nothing subtle about saying to this young man who may be wavering, "I am going to fight to the end, and I have. I am going to run to the end, and I have. I am going to keep the faith to the end, and I have." This is a strong encouragement to Timothy, who, by the way, was faithful to the end. And even the New Testament tells us he was put in prison for his faithfulness. This is not only a strong encouragement and a good encouragement to Timothy, and one that was effective, but it is and should be a strong encouragement to all of us.

Paul is our example to finish strong. I think about my grandfather, on his deathbed, saying to my dad, "Jack, I just want to preach one more time." Today, my father, who is 88 and will be 89 in a couple of weeks, will be preaching and teaching the Word of God as always. All the way to the end. You can live your life like that. There is no reason to crash and burn; it is not acceptable to do that; it is not necessary to do that.

We have all the means of grace to be faithful to the end. And Paul sets the pace for us. I can't think about the next week of my life, and I can't think about the next month of my life without thinking about the end of my life, because it's what I want to be at the end that keeps me on course right now. I mean that was the way it was for anybody in the metaphors that are pictured here. For a soldier to fight in the moment, he had to have a view to the victory at the end. For an athlete to exert himself in the middle of the race, he had to have a view to the reward that was going to come when he won the race. And for someone who is given a trust, to be faithful to the trust in the moment was to look ahead when he would have to give an account for how he guarded the trust he was given.

It's that view of the end that sustains us in the present. And when I see some minister default morally, when I see some ministry default doctrinally, when I see some minister default in terms of calling and wander away from the course that God has set him on, I know that it wasn't just the moment; it was that he lost sight of the end, of the final victory in the battle, of the final reward in the race, of the final affirmation because of faithfulness in the stewardship. We have to live our lives even now. And no matter how young we are in ministry, with a view to that end. This is the way to go

out. And the way to go out – if you understand the way to go out, you know how to go forward. Right? If you care about the winning, then you know how to run.

Let's look at these three things. The present, first of all. He takes a present look, and he sees the close of his life, and he's ready, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come." That's just so matter of fact, so like Paul. He says, "It's over; I know that. Already I am being poured out. It's already begun, and the time – the *kairos*, not the *chronos*, not the clock time - the epic, the era, the season of my departure has come. It's already over. I don't have a future in this world; I'm done. It's now taking place. The trial is already over; I'm facing the execution."

Look how he describes it as being poured out as a drink offering. That's just wonderfully Jewish language taken from the Old Testament. When the children of Israel went into the land of Canaan, God gave them a lot of instruction about how they were to conduct worship. One of the things that God designed for them, in the fifteenth chapter of Numbers – you can just jot that down if you want to look it up later – was what was known as the burnt offering. The burnt offering was an offering for sin; it was a recognition on the part of people that the wages of sin was death and that there was a sacrifice necessary to demonstrate that. A sacrifice which, of course, pointed toward the Lord Jesus Christ, the one and only true sacrifice.

But the burnt offering – you remember the burnt offering. It was an animal slain, and all of it was put on the altar. All of it as an offering to God for sin. But the burnt offering wasn't alone on the altar. On top of the burnt offering was flour mixed with oil, and it was put upon that burning animal. And that made the aroma a sweet aroma. It would smell like a barbecue with bread baking on it, on top of the meat.

But in Numbers 15, the final thing was wine, and the sweet wine was poured out across all of it as a sweet aroma at the top. Paul says, "That's my life. That's my life. I gave my life as a burnt offering. I put my whole life up there – all of it – from the Damascus Road on, which was a little more than 30 years before this. For the last three decades, I've been up there on that altar. I have been offering my life, taking no thought for my life. For to me to live is Christ; to die is gain. If I live, I live to the Lord; if I die, I die unto the Lord. And whatever happens, I'm the Lord's. So, I've offered my life as a burnt offering."

And now he says, "This is my final offering. My blood will be poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice of my life." The burnt offering symbolizes his life. The libation, the drink offering symbolizes his death. The imagery is beautiful. The man understood sacrifice.

You see, that's why he could live to the end the way he lived. That's why he could fight the fight all the way to the end, run the race all the way to the end, and maintain the stewardship all the way to the end – because he never viewed his life as his own. It wasn't about him; it wasn't about his success; it wasn't about his accolades; it wasn't about his prestige, his prominence; it wasn't about anything but sacrifice.

"And, of course," he said, "along the way, in order to maintain that sacrifice, I had to beat my body into subjection so that I didn't become disqualified." And so, he says, "Look I have given my life as a burnt offering. Now my death, my blood" – and he knew how he was going to die. They didn't crucify Romans; they chopped their heads off, a horribly bloody kind of death – indescribably bloody. One

can imagine that kind of thing. Or perhaps, if you've been in the slaughterhouse where you've seen an animal's head chopped off, you could understand it more vividly. And he sees the blood gushing out of his own body as a sort of a drink offering poured out on top of the sacrifice of his whole life.

And, you know, that is, in the beginning and in the end of our lives, the issue. It is all about that – as Paul says in Romans 12, “I have given my body as a living sacrifice wholly and acceptable unto God.” That's how he viewed himself.

So, with that context of understanding oneself, there is no disappointment when things don't go well for you, because you're not the issue. You don't tend to get burned out because it's not about how comfortable you are. You've already given your life away. You've offered up your life as a pleasing sacrifice, a sweet-smelling savor to God. And that's how he viewed it.

Back in Philippians chapter 2, verse 17, he said, “Even if I am being poured out as a drink offering” – there it was hypothetical. Back to 2 Timothy 4, it was real. He said there, “Even if I have to be poured out like a drink offering, even if I have to spill my blood and become a martyr” – not just a living sacrifice, but in that sense a dying sacrifice – “if that is going to produce your faith, then I rejoice” - Philippians 2:17- “I joy and rejoice.” So, what was hypothetical in Philippians 2:17 is real now.

And I don't want you to think for a minute that it's anything easy about this. It isn't appropriate, at least from a human standpoint, to leave the church at Ephesus because it's in such turmoil. Timothy is marginal, and Timothy is key to the future. Paul is in prison. Winter is coming, and it's going to be very cold, and he doesn't have his cloak.

Verse 13, “Please bring the cloak I left at Troas.” In prison, in the winter, if he survives through the next winter before his execution, it's going to be cold. And even worse than that, not only will it be cold, but he won't have anything to read, and that's really hard. So, he says, “Bring the parchments. And Alexander the coppersmith” – verse 14 – “did me much harm. Watch out for him because he's going to vigorously oppose our teaching. And at my first defense” – when his trial came – “no one supported me; all deserted me. And only the Lord stood with me.” And he's lonely. This is hard. Is this how the great Paul goes out? Where's the gold watch? You know, nobody was naming any cathedrals after him then. Alone, without a friend. Forsaken by Demas, and the rest left him except for Luke. Lonely for Mark. Wanting something to read. He languishes in prison, waiting for his head to be chopped off.

But then again, that's not anything different than his whole life, because everything he did was a sacrifice. That's how he viewed it all: a burnt offering, and now a drink offering.

And then in verse 6 he adds, “And the time of my departure has come.” Perfect tense has come, already has arrived. The clouds of death have begun to hover over him. I love that word “departure.” That's how he viewed death. That's a great way to view death.

When you use the word “departure,” you don't usually think about it in death. If you go to the airport, you're going to see some TV screens, and some are going to say “Arrivals,” and some are going to say – what? – “Departure.” Your use of the word departure simply means you're leaving here and going somewhere. Well, that's exactly the way he meant the word. In fact, that word *analogia* in the Greek is used for unyoking an animal from the shafts of the plow.

Paul says, "Here's how I view death. I view death as getting unhooked from all this work, all this toil, all this labor, all this exertion of energy. Lay down my heavy, heavy load of ministry."

Secondly, this word *analsis* is used for the loosening of chains, fetters, or bonds that held a prisoner. Paul said, "Not only am I going to be loosed from the burden of my labor, I'm going to be loosed from all the chains of my fallenness, all the chains compounding through my persecutions, all that binds me. I will be released from the confines of my flesh and released from the confines of this Roman prison into the glorious liberty of the courts of heaven."

Thirdly, the word *analsis* is used for loosening a tent. Nomadic people would put up a tent and take it down. And *analsis* was the time you took the tent down. Paul said, "I'm going to take this tent down, and frankly, I'm not putting it up again. I'm going to live in a place where they don't have any tents. I'm going to the room prepared for me in the Father's house, where I will live in the glories of heaven forever."

It's also the word *analsis* used for the loosing of the mooring ropes of a ship. So many times Paul had taken ships, crisscrossing the Mediterranean. He had stood many times on the deck and watched the ropes fall away and the ship begin to move out to the sea. This was the last time he would be sailing, launching into the greatest deep of all, across the waters of death to arrive in the port of heaven. That's all bound up in the use of the word *analsis*.

For the Christian, death is laying down all your burden, all your toil, all your labor in order to rest forever. Death is laying aside all that binds and holds of sin and difficulty. Death is striking camp, as it were, to take up residence in a permanent place in an eternal home. And death is casting off the ropes which bind us to this world to sail into God's world, where we live in His presence forever.

Paul says, "I'm ready for that. I'm ready." And what's so amazing about it, as he looked at his life, he was ready. There was nothing left to do. Wouldn't it be great to come to the end of your life and – not like my grandfather say, "I just want to preach one more; I just want to preach one more," but be able to say, "I'm done. I'm done, Lord. What is the delay?"

Reminds me of one of Browning's wonderful poems, a young soldier who came flying from the battlefield to report to Napoleon the victory at Ratisbon. The young soldier who came to give the report of victory was wounded, and though he was wounded, he was eager, according to Browning's poem. And he brought the glad news of victory to Napoleon. And Napoleon noticed his wounds. And in some famous lines, Browning writes, "'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."

"No, Sir, I'm not wounded; I'm proud to be dead in your cause. I've done my duty, now I lay down my life." That was Paul looking at the present.

And then, in verse 7, he looked at the past, "I have fought the good fight; I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." Perfect tense verbs, in each case describing completed action in the past with present results. Actually, the Greek order is, I think, more emphatic, "The good fight I have fought; the course I have finished; the faith I have kept." In each case, the object is placed before the verb so the emphasis is there.

This is how he looked at ministry: a fight, a course, and a faith, a body of truth, a race to run, a battle to fight. Wouldn't it be great like this to look back over your life and have no regrets? No sadness? No sense of unfulfillment? No feeling of incompleteness? To look back and not have any view of the smallest thing left undone. He faces death with what I think is a holy satisfaction, triumphant in a life work completed. He couldn't tell what the future was going to be. Nobody can. But that wasn't his. The future belonged to somebody else. His life had belonged to him, and that was the only sphere in which he could exercise his faithfulness. I can't think of any more glorious way to leave this world than like that.

I don't know how you think about death. I think most people think about death in the terms of the physical reality of death. They think about, "Oh, boy, I hope I don't have a heart attack. So, I'm jogging, jogging, jogging; I'm eating bran; I'm doing whatever I'm doing to protect my heart, protect my heart." I mean a tremendous amount of effort in that.

"I don't want to die of cancer, so I'm getting scanned. I'm scanned all the time." You're having so many scans it's going to give you cancer.

"I've got to protect myself. I don't want to eat anything that's going to do anything to mess up my body. I've had this balance kind of thing. I'm thinking of becoming a vegetarian. I don't want to eat any carbons that come through cooked meat, and I'm worrying about all of that." And making sure that you do everything – sometimes people anticipate that. You know? They look down the road, and they see themselves with cancer. And because you see it in others, you sort of project it to yourself. And wouldn't it be horrible to have a lingering and long death, and you worked so hard...

You know, I never look at death that way ever. I don't know how I'm going to go. And really, frankly, that's all in God's hands. I don't particularly care. But when I look at death, I'm not sort of drawn to the physical elements of death. I don't think in my whole life I've spent five minutes thinking about that. When I look at my death, I look at the spiritual element of it. Where am I going to be in my faithfulness when it comes? That's the issue for me. I mean I have absolutely no control over how I die because I am not going to kill myself, no matter what anybody wishes. That is not going to happen.

Therefore, I have no control over how I go physically, but I do have responsibility about how I go spiritually. And God has given me the means of grace and the power of the Holy Spirit and the truth of the Word to keep me on course, and I want to look at my life the way Paul looked at his life. I want to look at it spiritually. He said, "It doesn't matter to me if I live. It doesn't matter to me if I die. What does matter to me is that faithfulness to the end is going to mark my life. That's how life stays on course. You get more caught up in your physicality, and I will tell you, you'll go off course spiritually.

Now, look at what he said here, "I have fought the good fight." That's the first thing that's going to help you in finishing well. Understand that you are in a fight. And it's pretty strong language. I have *ēgōnismai* the *agōn*; I have agonized the agony. That's talking about a struggle. A very intense Greek word. It talks about – well, you know what agony means. It's not a mild word in English, not a mild word in Greek.

First of all, I understand that this is a war; this is a struggle; this is a battle; this is an agonizing effort



with an immense amount of energy expended. This is a contest. Sometimes Paul talks about himself boxing, sometimes wrestling, sometimes like a soldier battling. That's how you have to view it; it's a struggle. You have made your life a sacrifice. You put yourself on the altar; you're a burnt offering. There you are; you've given up your life to the battle. You know, that's the way to view life; it's a struggle.

I'm not surprised when things get difficult. I'm worried when they aren't. I'm looking around to see where I'm going to get hit, because I don't know what's coming. You know, a moment of peace is nice, but it's frightening; it makes me nervous. I just want to know where the battle is; I don't want any sneak attack.

People come to me sometimes and say, "Oh, I hate to tell you this, but we have a problem over here."

Listen, I always say this, "Do you know what's worse than you telling me there's a problem over there? Me not knowing it's over there. Thank you."

This is a war. I don't have a lot of expectations in a war except that it's going to be hard. It's going to be sometimes depressing. It's going to take every effort I have, and there are going to be wounds in the process. That's my view of ministry. I do not expect to go flying through, comfortable, having a happy time with everything going exactly right. If you take that expectation into the ministry, you'll be a casualty, because you can't go dawdling around in the middle of a battlefield without getting shot fatally. This is war.

Paul says, "Look, I've been at war since I became a believer, fighting against Satan, against principalities and powers and rulers of the darkness of this world, spiritual wickedness in the heavenlies, against Jewish and pagan vice and violence, against Judaism among the Galatians, against fanaticism among the Thessalonians, against temptation and fornication and litigation regarding the Corinthians, against incipient Gnosticism among the Ephesians and the Colossians, against fighting within my own heart and outside over my disappointments. And on top of all of that, I have to battle against my own flesh which causes me to do what I don't want to do and not do what I want to do. The whole deal is nothing but a war. It's a battle. And, you know, you just can't ever take rest. You just can't ever sort of decide you're going to shut down everything or you'll get killed. The battle never ends. It's a great spiritual struggle demanding supreme commitment and effort. And Paul says, "I fought it all the way to the end."

I like this; he also says it's a good fight. It's a good fight. I'm a pretty patriotic guy. You know, I get to feeling what you feel when I hear the national anthem and see the flag wave. And we all had a tremendous dose of patriotism – didn't we? – after 9/11. You know, we were all feeling patriotic. People were hearing people sing "God Bless America" and crying about it and just kind of feeling whatever that stuff is you feel about your country when you're in a crisis time. You know? And we were all waving flags, and we had them on cars. It's kind of disappeared lately, but that was kind of a good, healthy, emotional response, and we sort of felt the nobility of being an American. And, you know, we're going to take these terrorists on and you can see how quickly it dissipated with all the silly protests going on all over the map by people who were ignorant of reality.

But, you know, that – we like it better when we stand together, don't we? And we feel good about our

country, and we say we got a real cause. And the good cause here is that this is – this is not right to do this, and you can't just massacre people without consequences. And we took a stand, and I liked that. That was noble in America. And in those days, every time we saw a flag, we felt something special, didn't we? Want to know something? That's how I feel every time I see a Bible. If you think that's a good cause, this is the cause of all causes. I'm glad people will die for a cause – must be somebody from out of town doing that. I never get that. Now, see, I lost my train of thought. I mean I'm glad for noble causes, and there are some, but there's none as noble as this. The word "good" here is the word *kalos* in the Greek. If you look at a Greek lexicon - "fight the good fight" - it's beautiful, profitable, excellent, delightful, distinguished. But I like the word "noble." Paul says, "I fought a noble fight. It's the most noble of all fights. It's a fight for the honor of Jesus Christ. It's a fight for the glory of the gospel. It's a fight for the integrity of the Word of God."

Pardon me if I'm only mildly patriotic when I see a flag, but passionately so when I see a Bible. The men who come victoriously to the end of their life, the men who come to face the Lord with confident triumph, who are engaged through their life and ministry faithfully, do so because they understand they are in a war and they understand how noble that war is.

I don't want to be shamed by somebody who has given his life or her life faithfully for a less noble cause. I want to be courageous; I want to have fortitude. By the way, unless you think that's some kind of human thing, courage is fear that has said its prayers. We come, in the end, to be dependent on God.

So, Paul says, "Look, I'm in a war; I know it, but it is a noble war. It is the noblest of all fights because it deals with the eternal destiny of men and the eternal glory of God. I'm going to give my life away to something, and this should be it."

And then you notice also he says in verse 7, "I have finished the course." And he moves from the battlefield metaphor to the race. The word is *dromos*, athletic race. I stayed on course; I stayed on course. I started the race; I ran the race; I finished the race. That's one of the reasons I don't jog. I don't understand a race without a beginning and an end. Just running around. To me it's like playing basketball on a court with no hoops. You dribble around awhile and go home. I don't understand that. If you can't score, what's the point? If you can't win, what's the point? Forget that. I only have so many ticks in my heart, and I'm not going to waste them in a race that has no end. You're identifying with that; that's good.

Look, there is a course here, and it began when I was converted and called to follow Jesus Christ. And the finish line is the end of my life. And I just want to stay on the course the Lord laid out for me to the end. A lot of people start the course and don't finish. That's why Paul says, "Having done all to stand, when you put on the armor, and you've done it all, make sure when the battle's over and the smoke clears, you're still standing." A lot of people have done it all, but they fell. And Paul recognized, "Look, this is a race, and it had a start on the Damascus Road, and it's very soon going to have a finish. And I'm telling you, I've stayed on course. I never lost sight of what God wanted me to do."

And I think the key to that is, if I can borrow from Hebrews 12, looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. He was out there; He was the model runner for me, and I'm just following Him. I'm just following Him. And I'm following Paul, who's following Him, and I'm trying to keep up.

Have you ever been in a race? I have. I used to run the sprints when I was in my college/university days. I used to run the 100 and the 200 and occasionally the 400. And I was rarely the winner. And my objective was to stay as close to whoever the winner was as I possibly could. And the winner in this race is Jesus Christ. And right behind Him is Paul. And I'm puffing to stay up with those two. They're my objective; they're my goal.

This is a focused life Paul had; it's an absolutely focused life. It reminds me of Rudyard Kipling's lines. "If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue/Or walk with kings and not 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!" The focused life, undisturbed by everything going on around. You run to the end.

Just a thought about that. The apostle Paul also recognized the need to treasure time. If you're going to run the race, and you're going to win, seems to me there's always a clock. The race is timed. It's not just winning, but you have to be fast; you have to run against the clock.

Ephesians 5:16, Paul says, "Redeeming the time" – buying up the time. Paul knew how to finish strong at the end; that was to run hard and fast and to fight faithfully. And in the end, he could look back and be grateful for the grace that God had given to him to be faithful. How are you going to be able to share in Paul's epitaph? Follow his example.

One final thing: he recognized that he was fulfilling a sacred trust regarding the Word of God. He saw life not only as a war and a race, but a stewardship. Verse 7, "I have kept the faith." The Lord put him in a battle, gave him a lane to run in, and his was as an apostle of Jesus Christ and a trust to keep, and he kept it. And what was it? "I have kept the faith" – not "faith," subjective – "the faith," the Christian faith, truth. "The faith once for all delivered to the saints" – Jude 3. He kept the Scripture; he was unwaveringly faithful to the Word of God.

I think you know me well enough to know this is a passion for me. I not only am a preacher of the Word of God, I am called to be its guardian. It's guardian. I have been given a trust to take the treasure of the truth of God and to make sure it gets safely into the hands of the next generation. It's a guardianship. It's a stewardship for which I will answer to God; I have to give an account to God, according to Hebrews 13:17 about that stewardship. That's why I can't understand; it grieves me no end to have people play fast and loose with Scripture. I don't like that. I will jump into that battle to the defense of the Word of God every time I'm given opportunity.

I am concerned to take the Word of God seriously. I don't ever want to say, "God said," and He didn't say. I don't want to misinterpret Scripture. I don't mind putting words in some people's mouth, but not God's.

People say, "Why do you study so much?"

Because I want to get this right. Because I don't want to say, "God said," when He didn't say. And I want to know how to protect the Word from the endless attacks. So, this is my stewardship. I look at my life. What is my life? It's nothing but a sacrifice stuck up on an altar. And the sacrifice basically is

defined as I've given up my life to fight God's battle, to run God's race, and to keep God's truth. That's all I'm called to do; that's all I've been given to do. And do you want to know something? I'm not reluctant about that. I'm so grateful for that, because this is the noblest thing of all. Absolutely the noblest thing of all.

And then Paul takes one other look, and that's at the future. And I'm just going to mention this briefly. He looks at the present and the close of his life. He looks at the past - and the past and the course of his life. He looks at the future and the crown of his life. "In the future" - on earth I don't know; in the church I don't know - "But in the future, I do know there is laid up for me the crown which is righteousness" - perfect righteousness - "which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day" - is that amazing? We go to heaven and the Lord rewards us.

"John MacArthur, step up, it's time for your reward."

What am I going to do with my crown? Cast it at his feet. Cast it at his feet. That's the glorious goodness of our Lord. Paul says, "I don't know what's going to happen down here when I leave, and you know what? It's good to go to heaven and not know."

People sometimes say "You know, they're probably up there, looking down, saying, 'You guys are messing up what I did.'"

No, they don't even know what's going on down here. This is good. There is no disappointment in heaven. I don't know what's going to go on down here, and that's okay. That's in God's hands, but I do know what's going to happen up there. There's going to be a crown which is righteousness - eternal, perfect righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me. How in the world could God give you eternal righteousness and be righteous? Wouldn't God have forfeited His own righteousness if He gave somebody like you and me eternal righteousness? He can only do that because Jesus Christ paid the penalty for all our sins. And so, He gives to us righteousness and is still righteous.

"And not only to me," Paul says, "but to all who have loved His appearing." What does it mean to love His appearing?

You say, "Well, doesn't that mean you're really interested in prophecy?"

No. You can fiddle around in all 11 books on prophecy if you want, and you can have all kinds of charts, and you can be - you can know every pimple on the third horn of the beast, and you can know all of the little deals and nuances in the prophetic literature; that is not loving His appearing. Loving His appearing - it's certainly not wrong to know the details of Scripture - loving His appearing is having in your heart the longing that Jesus should appear. And if you do, if you love His appearing, if you can't wait for Him to come, if you're saying, "Even so, come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus," then that's testimony to the fact that you know when He comes, He'll find you faithful.

So, look at your life like Paul did. Fast forward to the end and ask yourself what the epitaph is going to be. Somebody's going to say, "Well, John, I wish I could say mine would be 'I fought the good fight; I've finished the course; I've kept the faith,' but, you know, I've already blown it."

This is not just for preachers or pastors. This is for everybody. I've already blown it. All right, God is a God of grace. We read this morning, in Psalm 103, "He moves your sin as far as the East is from the West." Right? "He remembers your transgressions no more." Let's do this. Today's the beginning of the rest of your life. Okay? From here on, you fight; you run; and you maintain the stewardship of truth. And the Lord will be gracious enough, of course, to say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant." And you will enter into the full reward that God has prepared for them that love Him. Let's pray.

Father, this is joy to our hearts that You have prepared for us an eternal reward, even though we fail, stumble. Paul did. He wasn't perfect by His own admission. But You have forgiven our sins. And we understand what You mean by faithfulness to the very end. Not perfect, but faithful, never scandalizing Your church or smearing Your name, bringing reproach upon the truth. Always a faithful soldier, always a striving runner, always a careful steward of the treasure of the truth to the very end. May it be true of us so that we can enter the fullness of the reward You've prepared for all who love You, we pray in Your Son's name, Amen.

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