

21. The crown of righteousness

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The comments made by the people who stand at the door of their death tend to be more serious, as well as reflecting their lives with satisfaction or regret.

Apostle Paul who almost could feel the edge of the executioner's ax on the back of his neck, chose to write his swan song '2 Timothy' to his spiritual son Timothy. As I said it before in my introduction to this Book, it is saturated with more of Paul's personal feeling than any other epistles he wrote. From v6 to v13 of this forth chapter, you can catch his emotion ever so vividly.

While Paul was writing this letter in his little cold and damp cell of the ancient Mamertine dungeon in Rome, he wanted Timothy to know that he was about to end his journey in the Lord on earth and did well.

But he was not just being nostalgic about his earthly departure, but he wanted Timothy to know how to live wholeheartedly for the Lord on earth.

A. THE TIME OF MY DEPARTURE IS AT HAND

2 Timothy 4:6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand.

The idea of a drink offering is first presented in Genesis 35, where Jacob poured out a drink offering before the Lord as a sacrifice. In the Mosaic Law, drink offerings could be a part of sacrifice to the Lord in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 23.

A drink offering brought wine before the Lord and poured it without holding anything back at His altar. It was a way to give wine to God as a sacrifice, just as an animal might be given as a sacrifice.

Please note the phrase "*I am already being poured out as a drink offering*". Apostle Paul did not hold himself back when it came to living for the Lord. Since his conversion, everything he had was for the Lord, every breath he took was for the Lord, and every thought he had was for the Lord. His life was filled with Jesus so much that even the imminent death didn't even scare nor bother him.

Paul understood that it was not the Romans who were executing him. He died with the Lord long ago on the way to Damascus. I am sure you remember the most important moment in his life:

Acts 9:1-6 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." 6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Since that fateful day, Paul's life was never the same again. Once he wholeheartedly persecuted the Christians in his areas. After the conversion, he wholeheartedly followed the Lord Jesus.

Some of you might think, "That was for apostle Paul. Good for him. He could do that. He was a sold-out guy for God. Not me, man. I have a life." For that I have a question to counter: "What kind of life? Oh, do you mean the life that does not include the Lord your Savior Jesus? In other words, you have a life of a few hours on Sunday morning at the church and the other life that you live in the way you want for the rest of the week." What is stopping you to live the life that is filled with true joy and fulfillment from the Lord?

The Greek word 'departure' is 'analysis'. It is an important word that has many meanings. It means "to hoist anchor and set sail." Paul looked on death as a release from the world, an opportunity to "set sail" into eternity. The word also means "to take down a tent." This parallels 2 Corinthians 5:1-8, where Paul compared the death of believers to the taking down of a temporary and deteriorating tent, in order to receive a permanent, glorified body.

Departure also has the meaning of "loosing a prisoner." Paul was facing release, not execution. "The unyoking of an ox" is another meaning of this word. Paul had been in hard service for the Lord for many years. Now his Master would unyoke him and promote him to higher service.

B. GOOD FIGHT, FINISHED THE RACE AND KEPT THE FAITH

2 Timothy 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

If apostle Paul was still alive, he would have been a sport fanatic with 12000 sports channels coming to his TV cable box. Throughout his ministry Paul used the picture of the race and the Christian being an athlete running the race in Philippians 3:12-14 and 1 Corinthians 9:24. Now he was about to finish his own race.

In first two quick sentences, he used athletic images – a boxer and a runner. He had kept the rules and deserved a prize. The third image is that of a steward who had faithfully guarded his master's deposit.

The Greek word for 'fight' is 'agon', from which we derive our word 'agony'. It was the term used for an athletic contest, such as a wrestling match. Throughout Paul's life, many opponents had challenged him, yet not once did he shrink away from a hand-to-hand battle for truth.

He also finished the course. He may have made mistakes along the way, stumbled, or felt like giving up, but still he ran hard, keeping his eyes on Christ, who was waiting at the finish line.

Hebrews 12:1-2 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, 2 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.

Did you notice how the author of the Book of Hebrews used an illustration of sports to get across his point to us? Doesn't that sound familiar? For this and many other rea-

sons I strongly believe that the author of the Book of Hebrews is apostle Paul himself. I am sure many notable Bible scholars would disagree with me. That is OK, they have a choice to be wrong. Just kidding!

C. THE CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS TO ALL THOSE WHO FOLLOW JESUS

2 Timothy 4:8 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.

About seven years ago, Louise Laverty, pastor Jack's late wife and Karen's best friend, left her earthly tent and walked into the loving arms of Jesus who had been waited for her at the finish line.

She was an encourager and a trooper for the Lord Jesus even while she was going through a horrible cancer; and was she ever a saint. Anyone who was married to pastor Jack for thirty nine years is qualified to be called a 'saint.' Truly, she had a loving heart as big as an ocean, yet she was very sensitive to the Holy Spirit's guidance. She knew when to stand firm, and when to reach out gently. At her memorial service, I quoted these two verses from chapter 4 verses 7 and 8.

A Greek or Roman athlete who was a winner was rewarded by the crowds and usually got a laurel wreath or a garland of oak leaves. The word for 'crown' is 'stephanos' – the victor's crown. We get our name 'Stephen' from this word. The kingly crown is 'diadema', from which we get 'diadem.' However, Paul would not be given a fading crown of leaves; his would be a crown of righteousness that would never fade.

I am sure you all remember the second martyr of Christianity – Stephen who was a deacon of the first church of Jesus Christ. Before Paul was a Christian, he supervised the execution of the first martyr and then began to kill as many other Christians as he could. But now at the end of his life he was ready to receive a crown – a stephanos. It is likely that he remembered the name of the first martyr, who died at Paul's own hands: Stephen.

1 Corinthians 9:25 And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.

Just in case you are wondering if we are going to walk around heaven with our crowns on our heads and argue among us that which one of us has the biggest crown, we need to read Revelation 4.

Revelation 4:10-11 the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: 11 "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created."

We, too, will be busy worshiping the Lord and marvel at His presence.

The crown of righteousness was not for Paul alone. It is for all of us who yearn for Christ's return.

Titus 2:13 looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,

D. WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO WIN THE CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS?

According to Paul's example and instructions to Timothy, it takes:

- Fighting the good fight
- Finishing well
- Maintaining the faith
- Loving Christ's appearing through it all

To do all these, the Lord puts us through vigorous trainings throughout our lives, shaping us more like the image of His Son Jesus Christ each day.

1) Encountering various trials with JOY

James 1:2 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials

We usually consider trials just the opposite, don't we? Why does James recommend we embrace them with joy? The answer lies not in the hardships themselves, but in how they deepen our character.

2) Patience through trials bring forth MATURITY

James 1:3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.

The Greek word for 'patience' or 'endurance' for some other translation is 'hupomone' which literally means "to abide under." As the tests of faith rain down harder and harder, we develop more and more ability to abide under the pressure. As a result, hard times make us "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing". In other words, they make us mature.

James 1:4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Maturity does not happen overnight. There are no get-mature quick shortcuts. It takes time-only the Lord knows how much time it takes to accomplish His goals for us. But if we try to escape trials prematurely, we may short-circuit God's plan and forfeit the crown He has waiting for us.

3) Persevering under trials bring forth CROWN

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

What a ray of hope for those of us who have endured one storm after another! James calls us 'blessed' which also can be translated 'happy' if we endure temptations and trials. Then we will be approved and will receive the crown of life from the Lord. Such unsinkable faithfulness to the Lord brings forth the crown of life which is James' way to say, 'the crown of righteousness.'

I don't know where you are in your life. Your life might be a sweet sailing in the Lord. Your sky is blue; the wind is gentle and pushes your sail right in the course the Lord wants. However, behind where you can not see now, the Lord has training waves waiting for you.

Or you might be in the sea of tribulation. You feel like you just passed that enormous wall of waves of difficulties; before you even can take a breath you see another tsunami coming directly at you in full fury. You are wondering if the Lord is even with you. Yes, He is. He is right there with you. Remember His promise "I will never leave you, nor forsake you." As the author of the Book of Hebrews told us, you need

to keep your eyes on Jesus. He will provide you patience to abide under, and strength to depend on Him. I remember what Corrie ten Boom said, "There is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still." The Lord will pull you through.

E. QUESTIONS

1) Am I fighting the good fight? Or am I dancing with my enemies – the world, the flesh and the devil?

2) Am I finishing the course? Or have I wandered into somewhere else and somehow hoping that I will receive the crown without finishing the race?

3) Am I maintaining my faith? Or has it fallen into disrepair, becoming rusty from lack of use?

4) Am I hoping for Christ's return? Or have I asked Him to take a number and wait in line behind the other priorities in my life?

WARNING: Some say, "I pray everyday," when I ask them if they read the Bible and meditate upon it everyday. You can pray all you want all day and everyday, but if you are not reading and following what the Bible tells you to do, your prayer is nothing more than a one way conversation to God whom you choose not to hear from. That is not the way to fight the good fight; finish the race; and keep the faith.