

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost; August 4, 2024

2 Timothy 6:8-17

He Will Give You the Crown

You see, I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on, there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness. The Lord, the Righteous Judge, will give it to me on that day, and not only to me but also to everyone who loved his appearing.

Sometimes it's easy to tell when the next thing coming is "Goodbye." It's often easy to tell when the one about to say it is close to you, your best friend or your sibling. It is probably easy for St. Timothy to tell that "Goodbye" is the next thing coming from St. Paul. Paul and Timothy are not related by blood, but they are the closest of friends; Paul often calls Timothy, his protégé of about three decades, his "son."

From the start of the letter, Paul has been giving Timothy general instructions for running Timothy's congregation. But then things get very personal. Paul is writing like a father to a son: final, solemn, personal instructions. The only thing left now is "Goodbye."

So many different ways to say goodbye! Casual wave or big hug; tears or smiles; optimism or pessimism. How should we expect Christ's own apostle to the Gentiles, the man converted by Christ to preach Christ's gospel to the Gentiles all around the Mediterranean, to say goodbye to his friend, student, and figurative son?

Paul is honest with Timothy, his son. This is goodbye. **You see, I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.** No one knows the Old Testament better than Paul. And it's natural, at the end of life, to return to what we know best. Just before a larger sacrifice was made, the Israelites often poured out a drink as a signal that the time for the sacrifice had come. That's what Paul's going through at the moment. He sits in a Roman dungeon; most of his friends have abandoned him, and the sentence of death has apparently been passed. In a previous letter written during a previous imprisonment, Paul was optimistic for release. Not anymore. It's time to go away, and there's no turning back. The drink offering has been poured out.

So what does that mean about Paul's life in this world? How does he see his worldly existence? One big sacrifice. He sacrificed himself for the Lord Jesus, who sacrificed himself for Paul. He laid down his life for Jesus' gospel, the gospel that says Jesus laid down his life for his friends. He preached it until they killed him for it.

As he says goodbye, Paul pictures his life not only as a sacrifice; he also sees it as a fight and a race. **I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race...**They are pictures Paul has used in other letters, saying that he was a runner with a goal, and no shadow boxer. You hear his words about "fighting the good fight" and "finishing the race" repeated in many contexts. But the last phrase tells us what Paul means by the pictures: **I have kept the faith.** Here we have the goal of the Christian life: to come to faith in the Savior Jesus and stay in the Christian faith until it's time to say goodbye to this world. And keeping the faith to the end is not pictured as a game of touch football and a stroll through the park. It is a fight and a race. It's hard. It's hard to keep believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ, an unseen Savior, in a world that screams against him, in the sinful flesh that pulls against him.

Like Paul, we need to fight and run hard. We need to take up the sword of the Spirit, the truth of God's world, and beat back the lies and temptations outside of us and inside of us. And we need to run untangled by sin.

But fighting and running are hard. So we sometimes get lazy. We let the Word of God lie flat, and let sin creep into our lives. We treat the Christian fight and race like it ought to be easy, like we deserve it to be easy, like it is actually easy. We need to see that as a sinful error, and turn to our Savior to forgive us. And we ask our dear, forgiving Savior to make us strong to fight with his Word, to run in his grace free from sin.

Because the bell will sound on the fight. The finish line will appear, the time to say goodbye to this world. And at the end of the fight and the race is the reward: **From now on, there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness. The Lord, the Righteous Judge, will give it to me on that day...** St. Timothy, the original recipient of this letter, grew up in the Greek world. The Greeks loved to wrestle and run, the two most popular ancient sports. Timothy no doubt witnessed, maybe even participated in, many of those competitions. At the end, the winner received a crown, a wreath, on his head, which would be pretty for a few days and then fade to brown. At the end of the Christian race, all those who keep the faith receive a much better crown than that.

The Bible speaks of believers receiving three crowns: there's the crown of glory, because heaven in full of glory. There's the crown of life, because heaven is life without end. Paul is the first to speak of a crown of righteousness. But it's this crown that's the key to them all. At the end of the race there will be glory and life because of the righteousness you receive from your Savior. You wear his righteousness now through faith, and will be crowned with it when you cross the finish line. Jesus' holiness is the key to the glory and life of heaven.

It may have sounded at first as though Paul were skewing a bit arrogant and self-congratulatory when he said: **I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.** But here he shows who deserves all the praise in the end, who gets all the credit for every Christian fight fought to the finish, for every Christian race completed, for every life of faith lived to the end: **The Lord, the Righteous Judge, will give it to me on that day...** Yes, we fight the fight and run the race; we keep the faith. But all glory goes to the Lord. He gives us faith and sustains it with his Word and sacraments. He makes us strong to fight and run and keep the faith. And he gives the crown of righteousness.

It is an amazing thing! Paul calls him "The Righteous Judge"! A Righteous Judge giving the crown of righteousness to sinners like St. Paul and you and me! He does it because he loves us, because he earned that crown for us with his own righteous life and perfect sacrifice for our sins, and gives it to us freely through faith.

And not just to you and me and Paul, but to everyone who believes, who by God's strength fights and runs to the end, who keeps the faith. **The Lord, the Righteous Judge, will give it to me on that day, and not only to me but also to everyone who loved his appearing.** More than you count: that's how St. John says it in Revelation. More than anyone could count. All standing together, crowned in Jesus' righteousness. Why does Paul bring that up in this particular spot? It is to say: dear Timothy, don't be sad for too long about all this. I'm going to see our Savior and he will give me the crown. And he will give it to you, too. And he will give it to all who finish in faith. This is not goodbye forever. This is only goodbye for now and see you later, see you wearing your crown while I wear mine. And countless around us wear those. So,

Timothy, dry those eyes and keep fighting and running until the time comes for you to join countless crowned.

In the Gospel today, we heard the story of Jesus delivering his disciples from a violent storm. In the First Lesson, we heard the story of the Lord delivering his prophet from a hostile army that had surrounded him. I wonder sometimes what Christians think when they hear such stories. Maybe you never think what I sometimes do, because maybe you're much less evil and blasphemous. But maybe you think it sometimes, too. It is a sneering, cynical thought: that's good for them, that they were delivered from their danger. Where was Jesus' deliverance when my husband died from cancer? Where were the chariots of fire when my friend got in that accident? Where's my deliverance from this illness that won't go away, this stress that won't let up?

Again, maybe you've never thought anything like it. Maybe you're not that evil. But if you haven't, you're more sanctified than most Christians. Because not only have I thought such things, I've heard such things from Christians – strong Christians, biblically knowledgeable Christians. And I know one Christian who could have thought and said such things: St. Paul. He could have written this: Timothy, my Son, can you believe this is how God repays me after I sacrifice my career, my status. This is how it ends for me, after I endure mockery and beatings and imprisonment, all for the Lord. Where's my deliverance, Timothy?

But Paul didn't say anything like that. Why not? Because he was perfect? Because he never had a blasphemous thought? No, he didn't say anything like that because the Holy Spirit was inspiring him to write these words as he faced execution by the sword, as he was forced to say goodbye to his son Timothy.

Do you see? This is how God wants us to see things. For the Christian, death is also deliverance – the supreme deliverance. What if the disciples had gone under in that storm? Their struggle would have been over, and they would have been crowned with Christ's righteousness for glory and life without end. What if the chariots of fire had not descended on the hills around Elisha? Same answer.

Do you see? God always saves his people from disaster. One way or another. And both ways are good. During his first imprisonment, Paul didn't know if he'd live or die, and he could see the benefits of both. That time, God delivered him by having him released from prison. This time, God delivered him by finishing his fight, ending his race, and crowning him with righteousness.

It's the same way for every Christian. You already are wearing the righteousness of Christ, and have the crown waiting for you. And he will give it not only to you, but to all who look forward in faith to Jesus' return. So we see this world and think of it as home. We see its people and think of them as the living ones. But there is another place. And there are people there are living, too. Some you know who have gone ahead of you, many more you will meet for the first time.

Yes, God always delivers those who trust in Jesus. It's just a matter of how, and to where, and with what timing. See your whole life with that view, and the life of every Christian. Know there is a crown waiting at the end of the fight, at the end of the race for all us. Remember all those who have already finished, who wear the crown. And you will run untangled and fight like mad, trusting God to deliver you from every trouble here, until he delivers from all trouble by crowning you there. Amen.