

I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH

Sunday, December 27th, 2020 - 10 a.m. - Teaching #2063

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IPAD TEXT - 2 Timothy 4:6-8 - “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. [7] I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. [8] Henceforth 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.”

In reading this text, you feel as though you are reading words that are very carefully considered and thought through. He frames his words around a ***struggle in which he is engaged*** (“*fought the good fight*”), a ***assignment to be completed*** (“*finished the race*”), and a ***body of content to be protected*** (“*kept the faith*”).

We’re fortunate to study the words of a man who actually ***saw the end of his life coming*** and took the time to ***describe the effect such understanding should have on the rest of us***. Many Christians die without having the time to say anything about it. Accidents, unconsciousness and other factors can sweep a person away in total silence. Many people never get a chance to articulate ***final words***.

There’s a special reason for studying these words on the last Lord’s Day study time for our church family in 2020. We have come to come up on a very significant time on the calendar. ***Not*** because we’re preparing to enter the year 2021, but because whenever a year passes by - ***any year*** - you have an ***end to a miniature lifetime***. I know the timing is somewhat arbitrary but a year end marks a sizable chunk of my existence that is forever out of anyone’s reach.

Long ago, ***Seneca*** wrote these words on the passing and saving of time - ***“We are mistaken when we look forward when considering the fact of our death. The major portion of death is already passed. Whatever years lie behind us are already in death’s hands.”***

We all know that death is the taking away of our future days on earth. That's what death **means**. But are not our future days being taken away from us, one by one, every day we live? There are **two** days that cannot be lived in our present existence: ***the day after you die***, and ***yesterday***.

I say all of this, not to depress anybody, but because of Biblical commandment - **Psalm 90:12** - **"So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."**

"Teach us" means this isn't something we know **naturally**. This is something that must be **learned** if life is to be lived well.

And if there's one thing I know for sure, after years of following Jesus, it is this: **No commandment from the Lord is ever given with the intention of taking away joy or fruitfulness from my life**. Every command is for my good. So, it follows, ***it must be good for me to think about the shortness of my life and the passing of my days here on earth.***

Now, let me tell you what I think the good of such a numbering of days is. ***I think the passing of a year is designed by God to be a dress rehearsal for my own death***. Leaving a year is like leaving a life-time in miniature. And that really **is** a very positive thing. Because it means ***I can reap the lessons for my departure from this world while I still have time to implement them in this coming year's living***.

It works much like a ***dress rehearsal does at a wedding***. There are many things to plan and think through for a wedding. There are so many things that can go wrong. People stay up late at night, looking through catalogues, picking patterns, sorting through colors, and lining up dates on the calendar.

Then, at the rehearsal itself, they practice saying their vows, walking down the aisle,

standing in just the right place at just the right time. They learn who says what and when. They want to make sure that, at the actual wedding, they will have done it enough times, they can't possible mess it up.

And my point is simply this: ***What that rehearsal is to the wedding, the passing of another year is to the Christian's departure from this world.*** With the passing of each year, the Christian has the opportunity to make sure he is on track in his life. He is preparing properly for eternity. He is ready to go to be with Jesus. He is not missing anything that will keep him from finishing the race well.

So, I say it again, this is not a **negative exercise**. Nor is it an **unnecessary exercise**. The Bible says it is at the core of eternal wisdom and power for holy living.

Let's consider Paul's meditations:

1) **THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE OF A LIFE WELL LIVED IS THE PERSEVERANCE AND GROWTH IN FAITH IN GOD**

IPAD TEXT - 2 Timothy 4:7b - "...I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"

As this year, this little, condensed life, passes from our hands, how shall we assess it? What criteria can we apply to it that will make it a useful rehearsal for our entrance into eternity? What is the most meaningful measuring stick?

I can measure it by ***financial profit***. That's fairly easy to do. Just look at the books, or check the bank balance. In fact, if you are in really bad shape, you don't even have to check. They'll be sure to contact you in thirty days, or so.

But that's not a good measuring stick because I know right now that I won't be using that same measuring stick on my death bed. My bank account will never even pop into my head.

And the same holds true for any other **earthly** measuring stick. Promotions, advancement, travel and leisure, sphere of influence - ***none of these will be meaningful standards for my life on my death bed.***

Paul gives us a carefully considered evaluation of life as he ***actually faces his departure from this world.*** He says, ***“Here is something to value and cling to, because you will actually treasure it more when your time to die comes. This is the ultimate measuring stick for a good life because it prepares you well, and transfers well from this life into eternity!”***

And here's the fundamental issue for a life well lived. ***Have you kept the faith?*** Well, just ***what is*** keeping the faith? How can we know if we are keeping it well? ***What are the marks of a life committed to keeping the faith?***

- a) ***Keeping the faith means constantly keeping your attention fixed on Jesus Christ***

IPAD TEXT - **Hebrews 12:1-2** - “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, [2] **looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,** who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Christian faith is faith *in* Jesus Christ. There is no latent power in the mere act of believing. The media may delight in describing us all as “*people of faith*” but the Bible puts very little stock in that vague, open-ended title. The issue isn’t the power of your *faith*. The issue is the power of the *object of your faith*. We focus on Christ Jesus.

This is the difference between the *exercising of Christian faith* and mere *attempts at moral reform*. Human will-power will never sustain spiritual growth. Jesus went to great lengths to remind us of this:

IPAD TEXT - John 15:4-5 - “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. [5] I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

So keeping the faith is something *beyond mere knowledge*. And keeping the faith involves something *beyond* the *initial act of believing*. We know this because Jesus is talking to people who are *already His disciples in this passage*. The issue here isn’t whether or not they know *who He is*. The issue here is *do they keep their lives in Christ Jesus day by day*.

This is the issue of keeping the faith for all believers. What are the specific points where your life is *sustained in His*? And how do you *protect* that relationship with Jesus in actual practice?

Jesus is talking to *me* in these verses. He’s trying to tell me I don’t need Him any *less* today, fifty years after my conversion, than I needed Him then. The passing of time doesn’t make abiding in Christ Jesus automatic. *I tend to*

forget that.

Question: ***Do you look to Jesus, every day, before you look to anything else on the agenda for that day?*** Do you bow before Him, acknowledging His supremacy and Lordship, ***before*** you give your heart, mind and strength to anything else. That is how you keep the faith.

Here are three great resolutions. Give God the ***first part of every day***. Give God the ***first day of every week***. And give God the ***first portion of all your material resources***.

- b) ***Keeping the faith means resisting unbelief, doubt and discouragement with nothing but the Sword of God's good promise***

Remember, ***you will always experience doubt in this world***. This is true whether you are a Christian or an atheist. C.S. Lewis said, ***"When I was an atheist there were times God seemed dreadfully real!"***

The fight of faith is the ***fight against unbelief***. Unbelief is the attack dog of Satan. The enemy of your soul is relentless in his attack on your ***confidence in God***. It's your ***faith*** he's after. He values nothing else about you.

Here is a spiritual law: ***Before people disobey God, they stop trusting God***. The stream of unbelief flows unaltered from its source in Genesis 2 and 3. The devil always ***deceives*** before he ***attacks***. People come to believe that the path God has chosen for them is ***unreasonable*** at some point. Their confidence in God is ***diminished*** to a level ***below their confidence in their own judgement***. They stop ***trusting***. ***Then*** they stop ***following***.

I've seen this over and over again. A man's wife leaves him for another man. Over the years the deserted husband slips into immorality. But long before the act of transgression, the mind starts to build its case, ***never seeing Satan's slight of hand:***

"I was faithfully following Jesus. I was a good husband. Now my wife has left me. ***How long do I have to wait for someone else for companionship before she divorces me?*** Is it fair of God to cause me to be alone all this time? It's not easy being alone. Surely, if God is good He'd want me to be fulfilled and happy. Here's someone who seems so right for me! Surely God can't deny me someone who makes me so happy just because I happen to still be married?"

And little by little, almost unperceived, the ***balance of trust shifts***. Thoughts are sown in my mind. God is made to appear either unjust, or uncaring, or both. ***First*** I doubt. ***Then*** I disobey.

That's why the Bible says the victory that overcomes the world is your faith. That's why the Bible says without faith it is impossible to please God. And that's why Paul says, if you want to live life well - if you want to be ready for your time of departure from this life and your entrance with joy into eternity, above all else, ***keep the faith!*** Never, never, never, lose your trust - your confidence in God.

So we keep the faith by ***looking to Jesus***. We keep the faith by ***resisting doubt and unbelief***. And third:

- c) ***We keep the faith by not getting entangled in this present world***

Paul says this specifically in this very letter:

IPAD TEXT - 2 Timothy 2:4 - “No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.”

There is nothing in the immediate context of the first half of 2 Timothy chapter 2 that would indicate Paul had anything sinister in mind when he mentioned becoming ***entangled in the affairs of everyday life***. He just meant the stuff we all have to do every day. Not ***wicked*** stuff. Just the ***every day activities of life in this world***.

And all of those routines - those activities - have the tendency to make us feel they are actually what life is all about. ***What we do each day tends to anchor our hearts and minds here***.

That's why Paul uses the illustration of a ***soldier***. I've never lived through any kind of war experience. I've been ***alive*** while wars were being fought ***somewhere else*** in the world. But I've never had my daily routine ***affected*** by the conditions of war.

But I've talked to people who have. I've talked to people who know what it's like to not be able to turn the lights on after dark because of ***black-out conditions***. I've talked to people who couldn't buy certain materials and fabrics because those materials were needed on the front, for the war effort. I've talked to people who could remember seeing ***luxury ocean liners painted gray*** and converted into ***troop carriers***.

Nothing continues as usual when you are involved in a war. Normal routines

are all suspended. Resources are all **channeled** into the winning of the war. Everyone is **focused on one thing - winning the war.**

Paul says a big part of **keeping the faith** is bound up with the conscious recollection that **we are all living under the special conditions of war time.** If the Lord gives me seventy or eighty years of life on this earth, I'm to live every one of them with an **emergency outlook.** I'm not to treat one year of life as though this present situation was **normal** or **ordinary**, or **permanent.** Each year I have requires the steadfast determination and concentration of a **foot-soldier on the front lines of battle.**

- d) **Keeping the faith means living with my eyes constantly on the reality of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ**

This comes out so clearly from our text:

IPAD TEXT - 2 Timothy 4:7-8 - "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. [8] Henceforth 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."

Paul writes these words from a prison cell. He's facing execution. But while his body is in prison, his heart is somewhere else. **He lived his life on the horizon of the dawn. He saw all of life racing toward the Coming of Jesus Christ.**

I want to say as simply as I can, **you will rarely go wrong in life if you constantly remember the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.** Trials will

seem more temporary. Burdens will seem lighter. Questions and doubts will all reach explanation. All setbacks will be righted. All tears will be dried.

In others words, in the battle to keep your faith - your ***confidence in God*** - nothing will ***counteract the draining downward pull of the devil like the blessed, certain hope of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.***

How would you live your life today if you knew Jesus was coming back tomorrow? One of Jonathan Edward's famous resolutions was as follows - ***"Resolved: live each hour today in such a way that I would do nothing different if I knew it was the last hour before I faced my blessed Lord."***

So, keeping the faith is the all important ingredient to life. Keeping the faith is the measuring stick of this year that is about to die. When you have this ***dress rehearsal*** for your final departure from this world, this is what matters most. But there is one more point to make in closing:

2) **KEEPING THE FAITH REQUIRES WARFARE AND PERSISTENCE**

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

It's all about the verbs. ***Fighting*** the fight, and ***running*** the race, and ***keeping*** the faith shouldn't be thought of as ***three different*** exercises. They are all descriptions of the ***same thing***. In other words, keeping the faith ***involves*** running a race, and fighting a fight. ***Fighting and running are how one keeps the faith.***

Fighting the fight means there is genuine, specific ***opposition***. That means keeping the faith must, in some way, be ***a hard thing to do***. The devil seeks to

destroy your faith. He uses events and circumstances to **wear your faith thin**. The **Prince of the power of the air organizes life against your faith in Jesus Christ**.

Running the race means this battle won't be won quickly. Keeping the faith is like running a marathon in the mountains. Pounding heart. Screaming lungs. Parched throat. Blistered feet. You can't do this well without exercise and training.

We need to consider this every day we walk with Jesus. Our natural tendency is to think that any element of struggle in our walk with Jesus is somehow an unnatural thing. But it isn't. Paul **simply does not even recognize a Christianity that isn't like fighting a fight and running a race**. He knows nothing of a coasting kind of Christianity. The faith is **infinitely satisfying**. It is **a great producer of joy**. Jesus said it is like **buried treasure** or a **pearl of great price**. But it is never **easy**.

So let me do all I can to encourage you today. Certainly, the fight is **winnable**. And the race is **finishable**. All of heaven is there to help you keep the faith. But remember, the race isn't over just because you have **started**. The race isn't over until you **cross the finish line**.

IPAD TEXT - Hebrews 6:11-12 - "And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, [12] so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."