

LIGHT AT EVENTIDE

"For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." II Timothy 4:6-8.

Last words from those we esteem and love become to us a cherished and gracious memory, but they have a special importance and value when they come from one whose outlook on life has been large, whose experiences have gone deeper than most people, and whose career has been varied and long. One's last words are very frequently a revelation of the inner character and life. The time of departure is a solemnizing thing.

When the Roman general had finished his campaign, there were four things in front of him. First, the sacrifice he made before he went home, when he took a thank-offering and poured it out to God in thankfulness and in prayer for his voyage. Second, there was the going on board the transport that was to take him away from the scene of the fight back to his home. Third, there was the review of his work which took place in the Senate. And fourth, there was the award, or the crown, for the achievement that he had won. Paul doubtless had this image in his mind when he wrote our text.

These words contain almost the last recorded words of Paul, as he stands on the confines of two worlds. As to his material surroundings, he is in the Mamertine prison in Rome, and he knows that his days are numbered. He was conscious that Nero would put an end to his life, and he would soon be in another world. Conscious of his ebbing strength and approaching death, Paul's sentiments were reaching out in two directions, back into the past and out into the future. His face was furrowed by the heavy weight of many burdens. His body, never strong, had become enfeebled by imprisonment, the ravages of brutal mistreatment and encroaching disease. But his mind is clear, his voice has a telling ring, his words are emphatic, and his speech contained volumes of truth.

Every earnest soul is concerned about two great issues: how to live, and how to die. This great text gives us the portraiture of the living and dying of a great Christian. Paul's career affords the pattern of the way to live supremely and of how to die sublimely. From him we would like to hear what he thinks of life and its results at the end of his journey. In a marvelously condensed and yet wonderfully luminous statement, he summarizes his life in its past experiences, present values, and confident hopes by saying, "I am already being poured out as a sacrifice, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing."

Certainly these sentences contain a fair epitome of Paul's entire life. He is trusting in the Saviour. He is anxious to show His love for that Saviour. The welfare of the churches and the advancement of Christ's cause are uppermost in his mind. It is interesting to observe the beautiful way in which he describes his death. He speaks of it as an offering. "I am now ready to be offered." He describes himself as waiting for the sacrificial knife to be used, that he might be presented as a sacrifice.

He does not even say, "The hour of my death is at hand," but he adopts a beautiful expression, "The time of my departure" -- words which are sometimes used to signify the departure of a vessel from the port; the pulling up of the anchor so that it looses its moorings, when about to put out to sea. So Paul feels himself like a ship lying at the harbor for a while, but he says, "The time for pulling up the anchor, the time for letting loose the cable, and cutting from the mooring is at hand; I shall soon be launched upon my voyage."

I. The Christian Life Is A Conflict.

"I have fought a good fight." With Paul it had been a struggle all the way. Every success and every achievement had cost him suffering. Factors in this conflict:--

1. The conflict with self.

Paul had to fight with the powers of sin in his own carnal nature. How often he speaks of his struggles to keep in subjection to the Spirit his own fleshly tendencies to evil.

2. The conflict with the world.

As long as he was Saul the blasphemer and persecutor, the world caressed him; but when he became Paul the apostle, the world hated him. The more he loved, the more they hated.

3. The conflict with Satan.

After he was saved, Satan never let him alone. He tried in every way imaginable to get Paul to sin, but he never faltered in his warfare.

When Paul said, "I have fought a good fight," he was not boasting. He was merely testifying. He was not speaking of the quality of his fighting, but of the importance of the fight in which he was privileged to take part. He was not saying that he had been a good soldier, but that he had been privileged to participate in a good fight. As a warrior he had fought and conquered.

II. The Christian Life Is A Race.

"I have finished my course." Here the figure is taken from the great athletic contests in Greece. That Paul had witnessed some of these contests I have no doubt. I can visualize him watching as the runner, with his eyes fixed on the goal, strained every muscle in his zeal to outstrip his competitors. As these men struggled to win an earthly crown, so Paul would struggle to win the heavenly. An athletic contest differs from a battle. A battle is a fight between foes, but athletics is a contest between friends.

First, one must be a citizen before he can enroll for the contest. Unless one could prove that by birth he was a son of Greece, he could not compete for the laurel wreath. So, only those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit can compete for the rewards of the Christian race. The salvation of the soul is all of grace, but the rewards of service are all of merit.

Second, those who would win in the race had to strip off all superfluous garments.

Third, the winner had to have staying qualities. It is not so difficult to start in a race as it is to keep on when others seem to be outrunning us. What the New Testament seeks to impress upon us is that in the heavenly race the reward is not for speed but for faithfulness. In the spiritual contest the reward is always for faithfulness.

In the quiet of the dungeon, Paul looked back on those tumultuous years and rejoiced in the fact that he had finished his race with honor.

III. The Christian Life Is A Stewardship.

"I have kept the faith." Here he changes the figure from that of an athlete in the games to that of a faithful servant guarding his master's possessions. By "the faith" Paul means that body of truth that was committed to him by the Lord Jesus Himself. He means the great doctrines of revelation which he not only had guarded himself, but now passes on to Timothy with the injunction that he should guard well the doctrines committed to him. All along the way Paul had been absolutely loyal to the faith as he had learned it from Jesus Christ. In relation to Christianity he thought of himself as a trustee. He had kept the faith as a sacred deposit committed to him as a trustee, which he was ready to return to his Lord. He had been loyal to the person of Christ and faithful to the Word of God. "I have kept the faith." What a joy to know that he had!

When he came to say farewell, he was cheered by the glorious prospect that awaited him. As he looks forward his eyes brighten, his bosom heaves, his heart expands, his hope enlarges, earth recedes, his surroundings are transformed; Caesar drops out of sight, and Christ appears; the executioner's axe is welcomed as the key which opens paradise; the block is a stepping-stone to the skies; and under the momentum of a life on earth, but based on eternal principles, Paul sweeps through the gates of a felon's death to wear the crown of eternal life and to hear the music of the Master's gracious greeting, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

"The crown of righteousness" shall be given by the Lord Jesus "at that day", which is the day of the Lord's appearing. So Paul looked beyond the grave. To him the immediate future after death was a period of blessedness indeed, but not yet full. He thought of that day when Christ would put the crown of righteousness upon his brow, and upon all those who love His appearing.