

AWAITING A CROWN

"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.

While standing on top of a high peak in the Alps Mountains in Switzerland one day and looking in one direction and then in another, and marveling at the perfectly beautiful scenery, I was reminded of the remarks of the two men who once stood on top of the Alps. One of them looked toward Rome, and, raising his hat, exclaimed: "Glories of the past, I salute you!" The other lifted his hat, and looking toward Germany, exclaimed: "Glories of the future, I salute you!" Paul was both of these men in one. He stood on the peak of an experience from which he could look back upon the glories of the past and forward into the glories of the future and salute both. From that vantage point he stated the words of our text.

These words were among the last recorded statements of the great Apostle. Final messages are always remembered and cherished, but they have special importance and peculiar 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. Last words are frequently a revelation of one's character and life. Writing under the shadow of death, Paul dispensed with all that was incidental and wrote about things that were vital and essential. In a marvelously condensed and yet wonderfully luminous statement, which is contained in these three brief verses, Paul summarized his life -- past, present and future -- in terms of his past experiences, his present evaluations and his future hopes.

At the time of his writing Paul was a prisoner in Rome. Perhaps he was in the very cell in the Mamertine prison that is shown to visitors today, a circular stone cell far down in the earth with its only opening being a round hole in the ceiling through which the prisoner had to be let down into the dark, damp, and cramped enclosure. Paul was not under any delusion about his future. He sensed that the end of his earthly life was near. He fully expected that, at the order of Nero, he would soon close his testimony on earth with the red seal of his own blood. But there was no fear on Paul's part. Death held no terrors for him.

In contemplation of what was happening, in reflection upon what had already happened, and in anticipation of what was going to happen, Paul summarized it all in these memorable words which are recorded in our text.

Every earnest soul is concerned about two great issues: how to live, and how to die. Our text portrays for us the living and the dying of the greatest Christian, and from him we learn how to live supremely and how to die sublimely. Knowing that he would soon step forth from his imprisonment through the gateway of a violent and bloody death, Paul looked out on his present and said, "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand." He looked back on his past and said, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." Then, as he looked forward to his future he said, "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day."

In these memorable words Paul was not boasting. One does not speak or write

boastful or trifling words when he is facing death by martyrdom. This humble man cheerfully gave God the glory and was always quick to bear testimony to the fact that he was what he was by the grace of God. These choice words were written to encourage, inspire, and challenge his friend Timothy, who was facing conditions and problems which were sufficient to discourage him, or any other Christians who faced similar circumstances.

I. The Present.

Most people dread death. Even many Christians are stricken with fear at the very thought of death. But that was not the case with Paul. The tone of his utterance was truly Christian and essentially noble. When face to face with life's great adventure, with a calm assurance and a glorious peace Paul spoke of his death as an offering. In singularly forceful and impressive language he said, "I am being poured out as a libation." In describing his estate at that particular time, Paul said that his life, with all of its interests, contacts, loves and possibilities, was being severed from earth, and that his life's blood was being poured out like water which could never be regathered. Thus he declared the solemn finality of his present estate which was passing swiftly. Since Christ had saved him, and his life belonged to the Lord, Paul was glad to die for Him.

Knowing that the time for the separation of his spirit and his body was at hand, Paul spoke of death as "the time of my departure." The word which is translated "departure" means "loosening." It was used with reference to loosening the cables and lifting the anchor of a ship preparatory to her leaving the harbor and sailing out into the open sea. Death was about to loose the cable and lift the anchor for him and let Paul sail out into the broad and deep waters of eternity, where he would be free from the narrow limitations of the body in the little harbor of this earthly life. Paul rejoiced in the thought that, in the providence of God, the end was near, and also in the fact that he was ready for it whenever and however it might come.

II. The Past.

Now that the end of life is near Paul looks back. What does he see? What is his view of life?

1. The Christian life is a conflict.

This view of the Christian life as expressed by Paul in the words, "I have fought a good fight," ought not to surprise us. Even before Paul was saved he was a fighter for the principles in which he believed. When he received the gift of salvation he immediately became a fighter for the Lord. With him the Christian life was a struggle all the way.

(1) He had a conflict with self.

Paul had to fight with the powers of sin in his own carnal nature. He frequently spoke of his struggles to keep in subjection to the Holy Spirit his own fleshly tendencies to evil.

(2) He had a conflict with the world.

By the world is meant the established order of things in human life apart from God. 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. James wrote, "Whosoever therefore will be a friend

of the world is the enemy of God" (4:4). It is clear that the world is at enmity with God. If we are on God's side, the world will also be at enmity with us.

"Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize,
And sailed through bloody seas?

Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace,
To help me on to God?"

(3) He had a conflict with Satan.

After Paul was saved Satan marshalled his forces against him and never let him alone. He tried in every way imaginable to get Paul to sin, but the Apostle never faltered in his warfare. Paul never did allow trial and persecution to stop him from preaching the gospel of Christ wherever he went.

If any Christian has not found it necessary to fight against self, the world, and Satan, it is only because he has already surrendered to the enemy and is in his power. Paul fought for purity against impurity, for truth against error, for right against wrong, and for God against Satan; and then called it a good fight. He fought this good fight in the right manner and conquered in a glorious fashion. So can we, and so should we.

2. The Christian life is a race.

Knowing that he was near the end of his journey, Paul penned the words, "I have finished my course." This figure was taken from the great athletic contests in Greece, which were so popular in his day. As the runners had fixed their eyes on the goal and strained every muscle in their zeal to outrun the others and win an earthly crown, so Paul struggled to win the heavenly crown. The only ones who could win in those races were those who proved that by birth they were the sons of Greece, who removed their superfluous garments, who ran on the prescribed track and had enough staying qualities to persevere to the goal. It was not so difficult to start in the race as it was to keep on when others were outrunning them. Those who win the rewards in the heavenly race are those who have been born into the family of God, lay aside their besetting sins, follow the course which the Lord has prescribed, and persevere until the race is finished. Looking back on the tumultuous years of his Christian career, Paul rejoiced in the fact that he had finished his race with honor.

3. The Christian life is an entrustment.

Thinking of himself as a steward, Paul said, "I have kept the faith." By "the faith" is meant that body of truth which was committed to Paul by the Lord Jesus Christ. Not only did Paul believe the truth, but he guarded it against many assaults. He kept the great doctrines of revelation as a sacred deposit committed to him as a trustee. Like some precious possession that God had placed in his very hand, Paul had cherished it, clung to it, safeguarded it, and held it fast when his foes had attempted to wrest it from him. He remained loyal to the person of Christ and faithful to the Word of God. What a joy and satisfaction to know that he had! He rejoiced to say, "I have kept the faith."

III. The Future.

Paul never used words of slippery uncertainty when he wrote about the future. On one occasion he wrote, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (II Timothy 1:12). He also wrote, "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (II Corinthians 5:1). There was no "if" or "but" in Paul's creed, but a ringing assurance and certainty.

When he came to say farewell, Paul was cheered by the glorious prospect that awaited him. As he looked beyond the dungeon, the trial, and the executioner's block, he saw the dawn of a cloudless day and a gracious gift to be bestowed. He remarked, "There is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day." As he looked forward to that day his eyes brightened, his bosom heaved, his heart expanded, his hopes enlarged, earth receded, his surroundings were transformed, the executioner's axe was welcomed as the key to paradise, and Paul swept through the gates of death to wear the crown of righteousness and to hear the music of the Master's gracious greeting, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

In that remarkable vision Paul saw a glorious host of victorious souls. He said, "And not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." This crown of righteousness, which will be ours without fail, if we love Christ and spend our lives in faithful service for Him and long for His appearing, will afford us an inexpressible joy. Our text assures us that this crown of righteousness awaits all who truly love Christ and long for His return. If that is how you would like for it to be then, then see to it that you live like Christ wants you to live now.

During the Civil War, one of General Sherman's generals was recalled by order from Washington. General Howard was given command of his brigade, and he held it throughout the southern campaign. After the war, there was a great celebration in Washington, with the victorious army marching in review before the President. Sherman wrote to Howard that political friends of the general he had replaced were pulling wires to have that general ride at the head of the brigade instead of Howard. In indignant protest Howard wrote and appealed to Sherman to see that such injustice was not done. Sherman replied that the order had been issued; that it was unjust, but that it was no time to make a fight for personal rights; and he appealed to Howard as a Christian to submit.

Then Howard replied, "Since you appeal to me on that ground, I yield and will ride in the ranks wherever assigned.

On the day of the review, early in the morning, Sherman sent for Howard and told him that he was to ride not at the head of his brigade, but at the head of the army, beside Sherman himself. Howard had yielded something of self and proper right for the sake of the cause, and he gained far more than he sacrificed. No truly obedient Christian will ever find it otherwise in the long run.

As for myself, therest of the time that the Lord shall allot to me on this earth is going to be spent in fighting the good fight, finishing the course which the Lord has assigned to me, and keeping the faith or body of truth which He has entrusted to me, with the blessed assurance that awaiting me is a crown of righteousness, and not for me only, but also for all other children of God who love and long for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.