

LIFE'S GREATEST REWARD

Radio Sermon delivered over Sta. KRLD
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"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 Tim. 4:6-8)

Thus wrote the peerless Paul toward the close of his life. He was in a Roman prison with the sentence of death hanging over his head. He was alone without a friend to comfort him. The course of his life was soon to terminate. The future seemed hopeless and he was resigned to death. Yet in his last days he was not given to pessimism, disappointment, and disillusionment as are so many who have come to their end. Rather, he approached the end in triumph, with joy, confidence, and supreme resignation. To most people, old age is the time of bitterness and disappointment. Not so with Paul. It was his hour of supreme triumph; his hour of greatest joy. Though in prison, with death awaiting him, with not a friend to stand by him, with none of the comforts of life to sustain him, yet he was happy and confident as he waited his departure. He could say, "I am now ready to be offered." What comfort this! What assurance! How precious and sweet to one who has labored so long and faithfully for his Master! Can we say that we are "now ready" to die? If death came to us today, could we truthfully say, "we are now ready" to go? Would we have the same comfort and hope in death? Would we be as certain of the crown as was Paul? We must become Christians and faithfully live that life unto the end to have this assurance. If we are Christians but we are cold, indifferent, careless and lukewarm we are not ready for death, nor can we have this assurance. We must live as Paul lived to be sure of the crown.

I. When facing death, Paul looked back over his past. He saw his whole life spread out, as it were, before him. He calmly and truthfully viewed his past and said, "I have fought a good fight." His life had been a constant fight. He was a good soldier. He endured hardness (II Tim. 2:3), he faced dangers and sacrificed much for his Master. Paul was ever a fighter. He knew not the meaning of cowardice, compromise or retreat. He always stood for what was right. It wasn't always the popular thing to do but he did it and trusted God for the consequences. He dared to face a frowning world and suffer and die rather than to renounce his conviction or compromise one principle. He was not a man-pleaser. He tried always to please God. (Gal. 1:10). How much we need that same spirit of sacrifice today. How much we need Paul's courage and willingness to suffer for Christ's sake! How we, as Christians, need his passionate devotion to God. If we would triumph as he did, we must be good soldiers and always "fight the good fight of faith" and "lay hold on eternal life." (I Tim. 6:12).

II. He saw too that he had run his race: "I have finished my course." He himself taught that the Christian life was like a race. (I Cor. 9:24-27; Heb. 12:1-2). He not only started but he finished the race! This is what counts. So many start out in God's service who fall by the wayside. So many are lost forever because they do not "finish their course". In running this great race we must train ourselves (I Cor. 9:25); we must exercise much self-control; we must lay aside every weight (hindrance); every besetting sin; and use much patience; ever "looking unto Jesus". (Heb. 12:1-2). If we keep our eyes on Him, our heart in His work, and our minds on things above (Col. 3:1-2), we will finish the race. When Peter looked to Jesus he could walk on the water, but when he took his eyes off the Master he began to sink. So it is with us when we turn our gaze from the lovely Christ to the

unlovely things of the world. We lose sight of the goal and fail to reach it. Paul could say, "I have finished my course". Can we say this? If death were to come to us this day, could we truthfully say, "We have finished our course?"

III. He saw that his life had been a trust: "I have kept the faith." He, as a good steward, had kept and faithfully used, what God had given unto his hands. He had never mis-used his time, talent, money or opportunities. He was true to the best that was in him. He was true to the God that had so highly honored him. He had kept "the faith". He had never departed from the faith (I Tim. 4:1); he had never shipwrecked it (I Tim. 1:19); he had never cast off the faith (I Tim. 5:12); nor had he ever overthrown the faith of others (II Tim. 2:17-18). He had been sound in doctrine and pure in life. What a testimony! He had preached the faith; he had defended the faith against all false teachers and had ever stood ready to defend it (Phil. 1:17); and now "that faith" was his comfort in death. We cannot die in "the faith" if we do not accept it and live by it. So many suppose that they can reject the gospel and then die in the richness of its promises. But we die as we have lived. We cannot live for Satan and die in the Lord. Nor can we live for Christ and go to hell. If we, then, live according to "the faith", we can die with its rich promises.

A Hope - "There is laid up for me a crown of righteousness". This had been the hope of his life. It was now his hope in death. Blessed hope! There was no uncertainty about it. "There is" a crown. Paul "knew" that if his earthly tabernacle were dissolved he had a heavenly home (II Cor. 5:1). So many Christians rob themselves of much joy by constantly doubting their ultimate salvation. Of course, we Christians can lose our salvation (I Cor. 10:12); but if we are living right, as was Paul, we may know for certain that heaven will be ours. We can, when on our deathbed, say, "There is a crown laid up for me." Is there, or can there be, anything more comforting and reassuring than this? When we come to the end of the way, what will wealth, power, prestige, prominence, fame and the glories of this world mean? They will all be left behind. They cannot comfort, they cannot bring hope. They recede, they lose their allure, they are shackles to those in the throes of death!

"How vain is all beneath the skies,
How transient every earthly bliss;
How slender all the fondest ties,
That bind us to a world like this!"

But how much it means to be able to say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." If we have lived in this way, why should we fear to die? Can we not, like Paul, be happy in our last days? Can we not approach the grave "as one who wraps the drapery of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams", supremely confident that death will not be a tragedy but a glorious experience? That it will not be the River of Death but the River of Life? That death will release our spirits so that we may go home and be with God? May God help us all, like Paul, to so live that we may have this assurance in death. That it may truly be said of us when we depart this life,

"Servant of God, well done!
Thy glorious warfare's past;
The battles fought; the race is run
And thou art crowned at last."

