

Words and Deeds: Journey's End Part II

By Jason Huff

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2 Timothy 4:6-22

Our final Scripture reading today comes from 2 Timothy 4:6-22. May the Lord, who is worthy of all our praise, richly bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. The apostle writes to his dear friend in the faith Timothy, “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing. Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments. Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message. At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion’s mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Greet Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus stayed in Corinth, and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus. Do your best to get here before winter. Eubulus greets you, and so do Pudens, Linus, Claudia and all the brothers. The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.”

When we reach the end of our earthly journey, who will we be? It’s not wise to assume that we’re going to be at our best or closest to Jesus when our lives come to a close, or that things will be easy. Scripture shows us many heroes of the faith don’t have a noble end. David follows the Lord all his days, but before his death, he advises Solomon to strike down several men. Solomon winds up serving false gods alongside Yahweh because of all the foreign wives he married. Josiah, the most faithful of all Israel’s kings, foolishly goes into battle and winds up slaughtered, and his death marks the beginning of the fall of the southern empire of Judah.

Church history shows that various Christians we admire and respect had similar problems. Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, became strongly anti-Semitic at the end of his life, maybe due to senility but maybe expressing some latent racism he’d held back. How many modern pastors have led their congregations for decades when they leave in disgrace due to some major moral failing? And our relationship with God can sometimes become very difficult. Mother Teresa wrote in her diaries that for the last few decades of her life, she had not heard from God as she did when she was young. She stayed faithful, but the silence of God she experienced was deafening.

The writer of Ecclesiastes knew this too. He wrote in chapter 12 of his book, “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you say, “I find no pleasure in them.”” His recommendation is that we turn to God early, to learn to obey, to learn to listen to God, before the storms of life start to brew. Because if we aren’t already prepared for those storms, we’re not going to know how to turn to God when they strike. Jesus warned us of the same thing when he told the parable of the men who built their homes on the rock and on the sand. When the storms hit the home on the rock, it stood firm, but the house built on the sand washed away.

In today’s passage, we’re roughly four or five years past the end of Acts. Church history and hints from Paul’s letters tell us that he was cleared of all charges in his first trial, and he may have appeared before emperor Nero near the beginning of his reign. He went on another missionary journey. But now, around AD 66 or 67, Paul is once again in chains. And this time, he’s not under house arrest with guards that trust him so much that they stake their own lives on his reputation. He’s in a dungeon, and unlike his first trial, Paul fully expects that he will be convicted and executed. It’s thought that within a year of the writing of 2 Timothy, no later than AD 68, Paul is beheaded on the road known as the Ostian Way, just outside the walls of Rome.

So who is Paul at the end of his life? What characterizes him? Is he joyful? Angry? Hopeful? Vengeful? While things are sad for Paul as he writes for the last time to his son in the faith Timothy, his journey’s end suggests to us the key components of not only how to die well, but to live well.

When Paul writes this letter, he knows that the end is coming. He says, “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.” A drink offering was a practice in the Old Testament where a large goblet or more of wine was poured around the sacrificial altar as part of one’s gifts given back to God. Paul says the process has already started; being imprisoned so brutally and so expectant of execution, the end is clear. The word departure in Greek referred to a ship pulling up anchor to set out, or to a camp of soldiers pulling up stakes on their camp to head home. Paul has hope in God and hope that he will be in God’s presence soon, not hope in any earthly rescue this time.

More than that, Paul is lonely. Some friends have had to go back to their own churches. Others, like Demas, deserted him. Only Luke is there with him. Paul is clear with Timothy which people have left of their own accord and which ones are simply continuing God’s mission for them elsewhere – he isn’t faulting them. But even at his first hearing, he stood alone – Paul against the world. Nobody came to support him, probably fearing the wrath of Nero and winding up in the same dire straits as Paul. No wonder that he asks Timothy to come to him. While the Christians in Rome do send their greetings, none of Paul compatriots, none of the others who have so encouraged him throughout the years, are anywhere near.

So with those things in mind, let's look at what Paul says and does in the face of loneliness, desertion, and impending death. First, think on this: *reconciliation, which is the heart of the gospel, is still on his mind.* Two ways that we see this...first is what he says about Mark. "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." There is only one Mark mentioned in Scripture: the same one who wrote down Peter's account of Jesus' life in the book of Mark, the same one who was a nephew of Barnabas, the same one who abandoned Paul's missionary journey when they got to the dangerous mountain passes that stood between them and the regions where Paul felt led to carry the gospel, the same one who Paul wouldn't take on his second missionary journey and became the breaking point between him and Barnabas. At the end of his life, Paul has forgiven Mark for deserting him; he actively orders Timothy to go wherever he is and bring him along. Second, when he talks about being abandoned at his trial, he says directly, "Let it not be held against them." He's not talking about God's overlooking it; he's telling Timothy, "Don't take it as a sign of something bad." He is reconciled to these folks, at least as far as he is concerned.

Paul is actively trying to be reconciled to others who have burned him in the past. That's the heart of the gospel. Christ died for humanity which had actively disobeyed His Father and deliberately had Him put to death. Christ reconciles us to the Father despite all of our rebellion and sin. Paul knew this personally; he had actively pursued Christians to their deaths until he became one of us. Yet God did not hold back His reconciliation from Paul. Paul models this to the very end. This doesn't mean that Paul forgave everyone all things, all the time, just as Jesus' salvation still requires us to repent of our sin and trust in Him. But Paul models for us that reconciliation is the desired end of our relationships, even those that go far astray.

We do not easily forgive. There was a heated discussion in Compassion's parking lot the other day when a gal at the dental office next door, known for being super protective of her car, accused one of our employees of hitting her car. Now our employee had no paint on her car, no evidence whatsoever of a ding or a scratch; she was right to be perturbed by the accusation. But both sides are now frustrated.

It is difficult to reconcile with people who aren't like us, who think differently. We all see things from such different points of view that I'm not sure that Mark's abandonment of the missionary journey wasn't just common sense to him – who would go through a dangerous mountain pass when there are other ways of getting there? We so want to be right. I want to be right. I want you all to be right as long as you agree with me. When we hurt each other, reconciliation is hard to fathom. We'll forgive, but we'll not forget. We'll remember that the person we forgave still has a history with us. We'll forgive like Jesus said, 70 times 7, but we're going to get making our little tick marks to make sure we don't get to 491.

Jesus, and Paul following in His footsteps, show us there is a better way. Jesus brought Peter back into the fold after Peter denied Him three times. He brought Paul into the church after Paul persecuted the church so harshly it had to disperse and go underground. Who is it you need to reconcile with? We don't know how much time we have, so let's get on it. And perhaps we need to remember that reconciliation is not just forgiving or forgetting, it's restoring relationship.

Another important glimpse into Paul: *he will let God deal out judgment on those who deserve it.* Alexander the metalworker is someone that we might have had a glimpse of earlier in Scripture – we’re not sure. In his first letter to Timothy, he mentions men (one named Alexander) who have shipwrecked their faith and have been excommunicated from the church for blasphemy. It may be this Alexander mentioned here. Scripture isn’t clear, but some scholars believe that this same Alexander may have tried to extract revenge from Paul and was responsible for Paul’s final imprisonment. Either way, this Alexander has done great harm to Paul, he’s strongly opposed Paul’s message. And Paul’s comment on him is, “The Lord will repay him for what he has done.”

Alexander had a hand in ending Paul’s ministry, in fighting him tooth and nail; there is no hope of reconciliation with him. Paul warns Timothy to watch out for him. But Paul leaves his fate in God’s hands. We might think, “Wow, Paul is being passive-aggressive here. Let him have it with both barrels, Paul!” But Paul knows that it is not his place to judge or to get vengeance. Paul could not know if God, in His incredible love and mercy, might one day turn Alexander around. Blood feuds were known to the Greeks and Romans; even Hebrew law had a place for someone’s death to be avenged. But Paul says, “God will stand as the perfect judge of this man who has wronged me.”

This is tougher for us than we might think. Most of us aren’t thinking about getting violent with someone who’s hurt us. But we fantasize; we hope they “get theirs.” We don’t believe in Eastern religion, but we’re perfectly willing to say “it’s karma” if something bad happens to them. Yet all of us are responsible for lashing out against God, lashing out against who we were made to be, lashing out against the One who created us to shine brightly in His image and for His glory. If we stood before God without the covering of Jesus’ righteousness over us, we wouldn’t stand a chance. None of us deserves a second, third, or 492nd chance. Yet God offers it.

We can rightly point out when we’ve been wronged. In some cases, we need to do that in order that others don’t get hurt as we’ve been hurt. Sometimes, in more extreme cases, people need to go to jail; there should be consequences to their actions. But vengeance doesn’t solve anything. Even if that vengeance comes through our justice system, it doesn’t mean we will feel better. Paul is not letting Alexander off the hook, not in the slightest. Yet the way he goes about expressing himself shows that he believes in divine justice, not taking justice for himself.

A third glimpse from Paul’s life: *even when his ministry is all but over, he wants to study the Scripture and plan for more testimony to Jesus.* Paul wants his scrolls and parchments. This is a man who probably has most of the Old Testament memorized; a lot of rabbis in antiquity did so, or came close to it. But he wants to turn to the Word himself and read once again the words of God and the stories of God’s people. And because of how he says Mark is useful for his ministry, Paul doesn’t have an eye to its end. He’s almost surely going to die, but he plans on ministering until that happens.

There's a word for this: *dedication*. Now few people have this kind of dedication to anything. I don't expect that we will have the extreme dedication to God that Paul had; God uniquely blessed Paul in that. But dedication to God should be our norm. Being in church with one another every week shouldn't be surprising. Attending Bible study shouldn't be seen as some great service towards God. He loves us. He is dedicated to us. Is two hours a week dedication? Add on another hour in short prayers across a week? Maybe you are dedicated; fantastic! I encourage myself, and you, don't ever stop. Grow in dedication. To his dying breath, Paul wanted to be known by the Lord Jesus Christ, and for Jesus to be known to others through him. He didn't give up on all this as he got older; he doubled down!

We have notions of how our lives should change in retirement, the end of work, but if anything, it gives us more time to be dedicated to the study of the Lord and prayer time spent with Him and service time helping others in His name. As we get older, yes, we have to take better care of ourselves because things don't work right like they once did, we spend more time at the doctor, more down time than we once had to take. Yet don't take a retirement from faith. It will sustain you when the difficult paths with Jesus lie ahead.

You might think, "Well, that sounds a little harsh." But it's not. It's through that devotion that we come to the final thing we see at the end of Paul's life: *he has assurance of everlasting life in the presence of his beloved Savior*. "I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day – and not just to me, but to all who have longed for his appearing." He knows God was with him at his trial and states, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom."

Paul is not worried about dying in the slightest. Most people are terrified. Yet Paul is absolutely confident in his Savior. He has stated it in his letters over and over again, and now that the time is here, that confidence doesn't waver. He is not "hoping that he'll be good enough," as I've heard people say. He is not concerned about his sordid past as the man responsible for the deaths of countless Christians. He knows his Savior, and he is confident that at the end of all things, he will see God and enjoy His Kingdom and His presence forever.

That kind of assurance is not supposed to be for the spiritual elite. It's meant for all of us who put our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. The reason, I think, we often doubt and worry about our salvation is because our dedication wanes. We aren't as faithful as Paul appeared to be. We have failed and sinned after our conversions. We are afraid of being the man who hides his talent rather than using it and winds up condemned. Yet that doesn't mean assurance of our salvation is beyond us. God chose His people before the creation of the world. If you remain in Him, if you keep on the path, even as you stumble and sometimes fall, you will be His forever – because He has already made it so. We don't have assurance of our salvation so that we can sin and do whatever we want; no one who is truly in God wants to continue in sin. We don't have assurance so we can bury our talent. We have assurance so that when the desert places and wilderness are around us, when God seems far away, we can keep traveling in faith.

We've seen the journey of the early church over the last year, and it's my prayer that we have gained not only knowledge but confidence in God and in His ability to use us to make Him known wherever we are. But we're also going to move even further forward next week as we begin our journey through the book of Revelation. I promise you, as interesting as the story of the early church is, "you ain't seen nothin' yet" – because Revelation will tell us how God will preserve His church and eventually bring us into His Kingdom forever.