

2 Timothy 4:1-8

Introduction

As the Apostle Paul writes his final instructions to Timothy, he also gives him a warning that there are troubles coming; that he is not to be fearful, but the very opposite, to be encouraged!

To know that when God calls, suffering will always be close at hand till the very last. He makes it clear that there is a day for certain in God's calendar when Christ shall suddenly appear and this world shall be judged.

"So Timothy," Paul is saying, "be sure to hold the word of God in its full truth; do not veer to the left or right; do not add, do not take away."

A warning to us all to be sure that we are not living loose or lukewarm lives, as Christ may return or call us any time!

But as that day of his return draws ever near, there is one person who is very much aware of just how close that day is; that person, of course, is Satan.

So as he knows his time is short, his aim is to cause as much grief and misery in the church as he possibly can.

His target firstly is sound doctrine, as this can take the eyes and thoughts off the person of Jesus; do this and that person becomes his puppet. He will be dancing to his tunes.

The Apostle Paul confirms this when he writes in verses 3-5: **For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.**

There is never or ever has been a shortage of the itchy ear group! They flock to the Gnostics, those who would have their hearers believe they hold 'special knowledge'.

Their audiences are those who never study a Bible, never read sound theology; they are lazy and they love to be fed by ridiculous stories and false doctrine!

The Gnostics are like those little fish who cling to the side of the bigger fish; they go where it goes.

I was going to mention some of these visions and experiences they say they've had, but I won't; what I will say (and this I find incredible) is that they warn against being deceived... How blind can one be?

So instead of listening to these people, we need to listen to the words of Christ. He spoke about ears, and said, "Open your ears and allow the truth to sink down."

Like a soothing ointment, if we apply it we won't get itching ears, but we must apply it.

Itching ears can lead the Christian into some very dangerous ground. I will not judge, but I will be cautious; that's our duty. Jesus spoke of tares and wheat, of sheep and goats, on Judgement Day.

So this leads me to my first point, which is

Looking forward while looking back

In verse 7, Paul says: **I have fought the good fight.**

There are those who say you should never look back in life. For Lot's wife, a truer word couldn't be said, and she ignored the angel's advice to her ruin!

For others, to look back brings pain and sad memories, even regret; we may bear the scars of the past, and to look back just opens them up all over again.

It reminds me of the story from Oscar Wilde of Dorian Grey; it tells of a young man who never wanted to age. So he gave up his soul to keep his youth, but his sinful lifestyle was to show on the face of his portrait, covered up in the attic.

One day, the cover is removed, and there on the portrait is the ugliness and vileness of Dorian's sins.

So we shun from looking back to old lifestyles, because they carry shame and embarrassment.

For the Christian, the covers are removed when we hear a song from our past, or a film, place or person that reminds us of our ugly past. To look and linger over past sins is to take our eyes off Calvary.

But as Christians, we are told to look back, as we heard from Martin at Easter; to look back at Calvary and be healed, be cleansed of all our sins, today, tomorrow, forever! We must turn our eyes to the cross and remember our covering there.

Israel were always told by their prophets, "Look back at what you've been rescued from; be thankful!" Deuteronomy is strong on this in its first few chapters.

Paul, while looking forwards, would also look back. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, he reminds them of the difference between where they've come from and where they are now. With affection he would look back to his first encounter with his Lord Jesus on the Damascus road.

I've fought the good fight - what's he doing? He's looking back, past tense, and he's looking ahead.

As Paul speaks of the life that's about to be snuffed out like some candle, there is no hint of a life lived by him and shared with Christ. His life was never his; when he bowed the knee on that Damascus road it was handed over to Jesus.

Did he make mistakes? Of course. Was he living a perfect, unblotched life? The answer to that is simply to stand next to Jesus! That will be the answer.

But what is he saying as he looks back? “I’ve fought against those seeking to twist God’s truth; I’ve fought to guard the flock; I’ve faced dangers, experienced suffering, to get this gospel across the Roman world, and now I stand in its heart and, with what time is left, I preach the Good News.”

There is no boasting here but only one; his boast is in Christ alone! Any sign of regrets? He could have avoided all this and lived very comfortably... Not a bit!

I ask myself and put it to you: what do you class the number one thing worth fighting for?

Endangered species? Poorly children and all that entails? The planet? Our NHS? These are good causes, but they are not number one in the Christian’s ‘good fight’.

The good fight is to get the truth of God and be sowers in our communities, our families and our friends; to share it, to protect it, to live it. This is the good fight, and it’s a tough costly one.

For we must look forward now, as we’ve seen what God has done for us in our past, to that day of accounting when all peoples shall stand before him.

We should hold no fear of past sins being exposed, for that holy gaze from above sees nothing but a blood covered path, a holy sacrifice, even Jesus. This is the Good News, and this is what we stand for, and should never shy from fighting for.

How thankful we should be for what God has done for us, that we shall not be facing such a dreadful and frightening plight as those whose most hidden sins shall one day be exposed.

As the battered apostle resided in a damp dark cell in Rome (which they say is in the Forum in Rome, so if you visit you can see it), he didn’t shake in fear of death or facing his Lord thinking he had failed; none of these things. No; the assurance and peace that rested in his heart was all the warmth he needed.

He had confidence that Jesus would not let him down, because as he looked back down life’s path, all the evidence of God’s faithfulness was evidence enough!

Have you doubts, uncertainties today, fears running loose in your mind? Look back to all he’s done for you; look forward to what he is preparing for you. Put those doubts in the prison and lock the door.

So this leads me on to my second point,

Looking back at the course that’s been run

Verse 7 again: **I have finished the race**

These words are a goodbye, and for Timothy there must have been a pain in his heart.

Paul’s words are saying, “The race is over! I’ve no more road ahead; I’m through the tape. There will be no more races to run, Timothy.”

As I think on Paul’s words here, I am reminded of when we had to run cross-country at school; it was that or football — no contest!

It was down a steep hill, muddy and winding paths; we would wear canvas plimsolls, shorts and vest, nothing like today's sportswear. It could be cold and wet, but also a good laugh.

From the hill, our well spoken master in his tweeds would watch us as much as he could, smoking his Capstan full strength cigarettes, not that interested at all.

We, in turn, watched him as we secretly smoked our cheap Park Drive, also not interested!

But as I thought of the rough and sometimes easier course, sometimes wet, cold, or sunshine, Paul, I'm sure, as he sat in those dark lonely hours, thought of the territory he'd covered.

When you have a moment, just read 2 Corinthians 11:23-32.

Danger was Paul's constant companion; it would never leave him lonely, but be there trailing behind. It was that wretched shadow over his life, constantly.

Do we ever read of Paul ever hinting of giving up, too exhausted to carry on? Ever saying, "Timothy or Peter, I need a break, a holiday; I'm close to breakdown."

He never gave up for one moment, did he? In every way, his life mirrored that of Jesus, the very thing every believer is meant to do!

So as this living word we read and study always does, it spoke to me: "Glen, what challenges do you have?"

So I thought about what I sometimes consider a challenge...

Having to give a thought about going to church when it's terrible weather — the parking problem!

Home group — I'm so tired and not in the mood for talking really!

The prayer meeting — prayer is hard going, and I'm sure they won't miss me!

There's Bible reading, prayer, and study on this list too.

So as I compared notes with Paul's, one word popped up — pathetic.

All these things are lifestyles of the Christian life, and all should always be engaged in, shouldn't they?

Any of my excuses were lame to say the least. Paul's assessment of his life was honest to the core, and we must be honest as well.

I'm not being asked to sell all I have, or risk some dangerous swamps or jungles to be a missionary to some vicious tribe. No, just to be a witness, share the gospel, and attend a couple of meetings each week!

God is so wonderful to his children, so caring and loving; just look back at Calvary.

He's never a bully to us; what he says is this: "Look back to those people you mixed with, those places you frequented, the life you lived. I've taken you out from all that and given you a new life, a new hope, a new reason for living!"

Doesn't any of this deserve our appreciation, our praise, our love, to such an amazing God?

Again, as we look back at the course we've run, how has it been compared to a Chinese Christian, or Pakistani or Iranian? No comparison really.

But every step of your walk, whether in those countries or in a quiet suburb, has never been stepped alone, and this Paul could witness to. Jesus is our constant companion, always.

Think for a moment of the mountain climber (who I think are mad!). He stares up, and what does he see... danger, difficulties, weather conditions, perhaps, lurking in a back room of his mind, fear and a little doubt as to reaching this giant's summit? Not once if he's sane will he think lightly of his climb.

What happens as he stands on that summit... all fear and doubt have gone, and all that's left is elation as he looks at the landscape below!

The world, once this virus has left, will get back to its business; it will carry on as before and continue its attack on the church.

As we consider this, plus the struggles we have as believers, we are like that mountaineer; we look up and it seems daunting. But...

We mustn't get daunted about the climb. The challenge is not us alone; our strength will fail us, but it's Christ who will carry us to the summit.

He started a good work in his church and he will complete it.

So my third and last point,

Looking back with assurance

Verse 7: **I have kept the faith**

As Paul considers and takes stock of his life, his confession is that he has obeyed and done all that was committed to him to do!

He speaks of assurance of receiving a crown, given by our Lord himself (v8). This is no crown of gold and jewels, this is a crown of far greater value; it's a crown of righteousness.

This has not been gained through our efforts or works, but by Christ alone; it's not a wage, it's a gift.

When we stop running around, as we have to now, we in quietness should apply these words to our lives. Can we say "I've fought the good fight"? "I'm running well"? "I'm keeping the faith"?

Paul considers his life an offering to God, a drink offering being poured out. It was no longer his life to live, but God's to use as he pleased.

This is where we struggle; that God must have every part of our lives, to own it completely, even if it means sacrificing it for his glory, as Paul did.

It's because of this that, in a sense, the Romans could not kill Paul, because he was already dead; dead to self, but forever alive in Christ Jesus. It's God who decides how and when his saints will die; their lives are not Nero or anyone else's to take.

For such a surrendered life, death has lost its sting as 1 Corinthians tells us. For the Apostle Paul, his words were not words of bravado, but solid immovable conviction; nothing could persuade him otherwise.

If he was offered the key to his cell door with a horse to take him away if he gave up his faith, he would have turned it down; never mind 'he who turns and runs away lives to fight another day'.

Paul was ready to walk through the door to his departure with a clear and good conscience.

Not a sigh of "if only..."

No fear of hidden sins being brought out.

No guilt;

He had made good his estate, his bags were packed, and he was ready to go!

How we must keep short accounts with God. If God calls us today, how is our estate? Are the roots of the Christian faith, like Paul's, deep in your heart or my heart, immovable?

If we carry sin in our lives, then we will lack that real assurance that all's well in our relationship with God; it will always have that cloud.

It's putting a restraint on the Holy Spirit's efforts to help us grow, to be blessed, to have peace with God. It's the car trying to move but we will not take the hand-brake off — it just keeps stalling!

God seeks nothing more than to bless and encourage his children, as every parent seeks to do with his own, and for that to happen, we need to give him the rags of our lives, which is what they are, so that we may be covered in the righteousness of Christ.

Proverbs 28:13 says: **Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.**

I would say to the younger Christian (and that's anyone under my age!) don't be of that mind: "Well there are things in my life that need changing, but because of my age it can be done later". That's a self-deception.

Live wholly for Christ now; before careers — let it be Christ; before sports — Christ first; let Christ be your first love before anyone, anything. How I look back now and so wish I had studied more, followed more closely his leading, and been more obedient; those wasted years cannot be regained.

Let Jesus be your first thought of the day and the last thought at night, be the Alpha and Omega in your life.

As we look forward in our journey toward our final home, let's leave behind every day not the feeling of failures but victories in serving him.

May the words of the apostle be our words:

I have fought the good fight,

I have finished the race,

I have kept the faith.