

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
October 23, 2016
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Faithful to the Very End
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Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

“And now, the end is near, And so I face the final curtain.” The Apostle Paul could have added those words to his final testament. A Roman executioner soon would take a sword and behead this faithful servant of God. This act of brutality would end nearly four decades of Paul’s fully proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ so all the Gentiles might hear it.

But stone walls do not a prison make, or iron bars a cage. They were but the stage from which Paul would depart. The man who referred to himself “as one abnormally born, the least of the apostles” would enter into eternity to receive the crown he knew the Lord, his righteous Judge, “will award me on that day.” That is what a faithful God delivers.

You caught that I used the word faithful with reference to both Paul and God. Both were **Faithful to the Very End**. Paul had kept the faith to the time of his departure. God will be faithful to his promise of bestowing a crown of righteousness.

These are some the final inspired words Paul wrote to Timothy, pastor of the church in Ephesus. The Holy Spirit moved Paul to write without regret and without fear, “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is at hand.” Like wine the people offered to God in sacrifice daily, Paul poured out his life as a sacrifice to the cause of the gospel. There would be no release alive from a Roman prison this time.

The way to describe Paul is that he was faithful to the end. Paul stated as much, not in praise of his own power, but in tribute to God’s power and protection of his “jar of clay.” “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.” The final bell rang in the fight against the unbelieving Jews and against those who said you had to keep the law along with faith in Christ to be saved. The goal of any race is the finish line. Holding on to faith leads to the result Peter wrote about “the salvation of your souls.” is [1Peter1:9]

Can’t we relate to Paul’s experiences that led up to his very end? “No one came to my support...everyone deserted me...But the Lord stood by my side and gave me strength so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles may hear it.” Sometimes others have not supported us, even deserted us in our gospel ministry. Still, the Lord stood by us, gave us strength. We are able to preach and teach and share the gospel of Jesus Christ with its cross and its empty tomb.

We will continue to be faithful to the very end not by our strength, but by God’s power and protection. These come through the message of Christ others proclaim to us so we hear it. These comes as God sends his angels to watch over us “jars of clay.” Maybe God did not have to deliver us from the lion’s mouth. God surely has rescued us from every evil attack. Faithful to the very end, God will “bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom.”

Whom does faithful refer to there? Again, it refers to both God and us. What awaits us when the bell rings, when we reach the goal of our race, when we have kept the faith? We, faithful to the very end, we will receive what Paul received. God will be faithful to his promise of bestowing a crown of righteousness.

“Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will award me on that day- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

The Apostle Paul was a man of great faith. We must remember that when the Bible describes the faith of a fellow believer, God does not require that same faith in all Christians. Having faith, Trust, in God’s promises is there period. Ought we to desire growth in our faith? Absolutely. Yet one believer may have the faith Paul, another the faith of the man who cried out for his son, “Lord, I believe, help me overcome my unbelief.” [Mark 9:24]

Instead of examining our own faith, we look to God’s faithfulness to his promises. God is faithful to the very end; to the end of our lives or to the end of time. What has God said? He will give us who long for, literally, love, his appearing at the end of time, the crown of righteousness: a literal crown, maybe; the final crowning touch of complete holiness without sin and its consequences, most certainly.

To get to the end of our good fight, to the goal of our race, to keep the faith, God will deliver us from every evil attack. He dresses us in the whole armor of God; salvation, truth, righteousness, and readiness in the gospel. He puts God’s Word, the sword of the Spirit, and the shield of faith into our hands.

Jesus Christ is the Righteous Judge who will give us eternal life as a reward of his grace. We spoke last week of God’s justice that punished Jesus for our sins, and because of Jesus’ work of redemption declares us not guilty of our sins by his resurrection from death and the grave. Faithful to the very end defines our God. God will faithful to his promise of bestowing a crown of righteousness.

Our faithfulness to the very end is not perfect, not by a long shot. And still by the power of the Holy Spirit who preserves us in faith by the Word and sacrament we will be able to echo Paul’s sentiments, perhaps with the same words; I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. It is a fight and a race, isn’t it? We will depart the stage of this life and enter his heavenly kingdom.

Our victory is guaranteed because God’s faithfulness to the very end is perfect. Our Savior is holding in his hands our crowns of righteousness. When I stand before him at his appearing, Jesus will place it on my head. We will join our voices in the eternal new song, “To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.” <SDG>