

A Fight Fought - A Race Won

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0:00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 25th of February 2001.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled A Fight Fought, A Race Won and is from 2 Timothy 4, verses 6-22.

Lord God, we thank you for the scriptures which you have breathed for our benefit to rebuke us, to challenge us, to encourage us, to train us in righteousness.

We pray now that you may speak to us through these words from the end of Paul's second letter to Timothy. We pray that your words will inspire us to run the race before us strong and brave to face the foe, that we may look only to Jesus as we onward go.

Amen. And these words from 2 Timothy are found on page 968 in the Pew Bibles.

[1:09] And as I said at the beginning, this is the end of our sermon series which we began after Christmas from this letter. Indeed, these are Paul's final written words that we have anyway, probably written a few weeks or months before his death, probably not hours or days as some people think.

But here in these words, we have probably the New Testament's most famous writer writing the last words that we have. And as he does so, a sentence of death, it seems, hangs over him.

He's in prison. He's in Rome. It's the 60s AD. And Nero is the emperor. Paul has already faced a preliminary trial, it seems, and now he is awaiting what will be his final trial, and tradition has it that he was then executed after that trial for his defence of the Christian gospel.

He's there on a trumped-up charge. We read about that in the Acts of the Apostles. The Jews who are incited to hatred against him because of his preaching the gospel have orchestrated his arrest, and then Paul appealed to the emperor, and so was taken to Rome where he's been.

At this point, it seems, probably at least a couple of years, if not a little bit more than that as well. In these words, there are echoes of Jesus' own trial and his death on the cross in different ways.

[2:33] Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and at his trial, Paul here is deserted by some and left virtually alone at this point of trial.

For example, Demas, who at one point had been a loyal Christian, his name is mentioned along with Paul in the letter to the Colossians and Philemon, has now deserted Paul, he says, in verse 10.

In fact, he describes him as one who, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. That is, he's not gone off to minister the gospel there.

It seems that he's abandoned the gospel and abandoned Paul, deserted him when the going has got tough perhaps, and now he's gone off to Thessalonica in love with the world.

That is, I guess we can put it in different words, he's counting his earthly pleasures as of greater value or worth than awaiting future heavenly glory.

[3 : 30] He's one who's perhaps sought some immediate gratification and has given up under the threat of suffering for the gospel, rather he's wanting to live in love with the world, enjoying the world's pleasures and avoiding its discomforts and suffering for the gospel.

Two others Paul mentions have gone, possibly not deserters, they possibly have been sent by Paul for ministry, though it's a little bit ambiguous, but later on in verse 10, Crescens, we're told, has gone to Galatia, that's in central and southern Turkey, where Paul himself had first begun his missionary travels, and Titus has gone to Dalmatia, which is what is modern-day Albania and Yugoslavia on the Adriatic coast.

They might be deserters, but more likely they've gone off for the sake of ministry and ministering the gospel in those places. And then we're told in verse 12 that Tychicus is gone or is about to go to Ephesus, probably that means that this person Tychicus, who himself has probably been a writer or bearer of other letters by Paul, is actually taking this letter to Timothy to Timothy in Ephesus, where we know that Timothy is.

So that's another person who is about to go or has already gone from being with Paul in Rome. Only Luke, we're told, in verse 11, is with Paul, a faithful and loyal companion over many years, one who was with Paul in some of his travels in Turkey and Greece, was with Paul in Jerusalem, and then again in Caesarea, it seems, at the end of the Acts of the Apostles, travelled with Paul by boat through a shipwreck onto Rome, and now, some years later, is still with Paul in Rome.

This Luke, a faithful companion, is the only one, really, of Paul's sort of extended ministry team who remains with Paul in Rome.

[5 : 23] Yet, despite Luke being there, at his first defence, at his preliminary hearing, Paul was alone. He says in verse 16, at my first defence, no one came to my support.

Now, that may be referring to a particularly legal position of being the *patronus* or *patron*, somebody who would formally speak or advocate for the defence.

But it may just be that nobody's with him. Everyone's chickened out. They've stayed at home. They've gone off somewhere else because they're not willing to put their life at risk by standing up to side with Paul at his preliminary hearing.

No wonder you see in this letter that time and again, Paul has exhorted Timothy not to be ashamed of the Gospel, not to be ashamed of him in prison, but to be bold and strong in the strength God gives to make a stand for the Gospel.

That's because so many people have left him and deserted him. He mentioned a couple of others back in chapter 1 as well. But despite being abandoned by them, Paul prays for mercy for them.

[6 : 36] So he goes on to pray in verse 16, may it not be counted against them. That is, Paul recognises that those who've declined to make a stand for him, who've kept their mouths shut and not appeared at his side in court, he recognises that they're weak Christians, that they've been afraid.

It's not that they've abandoned the Gospel like Demas, who's gone off elsewhere, and others, but rather in their weakness they've been quiet. And Paul prays for them for mercy from God.

He doesn't condemn them for their weakness. He realises their frailty. He prays for God's mercy for them. The word he uses for being deserted in verse 16 is the same word that's used in Psalm 22, which begins, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And I think it's another echo in these verses of Paul remembering Jesus' death and trial, which was unjust, and so on. Here he's been abandoned not by God, he's saying, but by friends, by other ministers and other Christians.

And I think he deliberately echoes the words of Psalm 22 in a number of places. We'll see another one a bit later. One of those who's been against Paul and done him harm is a man called Alexander the coppersmith.

[7:59] He mentions him in verse 14. He did me great harm, but Paul does not pray for mercy for him. Rather, he says, the Lord will pay him back for his deeds.

That is, he recognises that Alexander is opposed to the gospel and opposed to Paul, opposed to the Christian faith. He doesn't pray for mercy for him. That would be inappropriate. He's not a weak Christian, but he's an opponent.

And so Paul says that the Lord will pay him back for his deeds. For remember the context of this chapter. It began by Paul saying in the presence of God and of Christ and in view of his appearing, the one who's coming to judge the living and the dead.

So Paul has confidence here that that one who's coming, the judge of the living and the dead, will pay Alexander back for the harm that he's done, Paul, and the gospel. It may well be the Alexander who's mentioned back in Acts 19 in Ephesus as one who was then, it seems, a Jewish Christian, but now seems to have abandoned the Christian faith.

And maybe the reason for singling him out here is that he could be back in Ephesus. He says in verse 15 to Timothy, you must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message.

[9:09] That implies that this Alexander is back in Ephesus where Timothy is and Paul is exhorting Timothy to be cautious of him. Who knows, it may be that Alexander's been in Rome, done harm to Paul, gone back to Ephesus where Timothy is and given a false account of what Paul's been saying.

So Paul is warning Timothy to be cautious, beware of this man Alexander who does harm to Paul and the gospel. It's a fairly bleak scenario for Paul on trial in Rome.

Some have abandoned the faith, others have just chickened out, others are off ministering the gospel in other places, that's a good thing, but in the end Paul is alone, alone in effect with Luke.

Others have done him harm and no one has been prepared or gained to stand by him in his trial. So probably that's one of the reasons why he exhorts Timothy to come and join him in Rome.

Verse 9 says, do your best to come to me soon. And then later on in verse 21, do your best to come to me before winter. So Paul is wanting to be with Timothy for mutual encouragement, to encourage him to keep on fighting the good fight and running the race of the Christian faith and so on, and probably also for Paul's own encouragement, having somebody else, a trusted ally, to be with him there in Rome while he awaits his trial and death.

[10:30] There's also a practical reason for asking Timothy to come. He says to him in verse 13, when you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas. So Timothy presumably is going to go from Ephesus in Turkey on the west coast up north through roughly what is now Gallipoli, through Troas, collect a cloak that was left there at some point in the past and then come on overland to Rome.

And it takes some weeks for that journey to occur. Winter is on the way it seems and no doubt that's why Paul needs his cloak, a heavy poncho type arrangement that would keep him warm in a prison where nobody would provide much for him by way of clothing or bedding or food.

Not only that, he says, collect also the books and the parchments. The books would be scrolls. The parchments would be written on pigskin or goatskin, something much more expensive.

We're not sure what's written on them. Some people suggest that it could be Paul's own letters, copies of them. Others suggest that it may even be the beginnings of the Gospels that have been written down by Paul as information about Jesus' life.

Maybe more likely it's parts of the Old Testament, scrolls and parchments that Paul has. It certainly indicates that he's not going to idle his last days away. He wants to have those parchments to read.

[11:50] But also remember that he's with Luke and Luke who's with him is the Gospel writer and the writer of the Acts of the Apostles. So it may well be that these books and parchments that Paul is calling for will actually provide benefit not only to Paul but also for Luke as he perhaps is researching writing his Gospel and writing the Acts of the Apostles at this time even.

Not only that, Paul asked Timothy to bring with him a person called Mark in verse 11. This Mark is probably a Mark with whom Paul had fallen out earlier when he had an argument with Barnabas and they went their separate ways for the mission and for missionary work.

But now it seems that this Mark is reconciled to Paul and vice versa and Paul wants Mark to be with him because he's useful in ministry. Maybe to encourage Mark, maybe for Mark to minister in Rome, maybe to minister to Paul, we're not precisely sure.

But this same Mark is Mark the Gospel writer as well. So here we have a little suspected picture that in Rome will be not only Paul with Luke and Timothy joining him but also Mark.

And so no wonder we find such similarities between Mark and Luke in their Gospels if indeed they were both together with Paul in Rome for some period of time. Possibly here, writing down information, recognising that the first generation of Christians is dying out or being killed and so therefore it becomes more important to record in writing the events we find in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

[13:24] What we get in these little glimpses of people moving around is something that should give us some confidence that the Gospels are reliable. From time to time we hear of people who try to dismiss them as being myths and old wives' tales handed down, word of mouth over generations that obviously have lost their truth somewhere along the line.

We're talking here about 30 years after the resurrection. If you think back to 1970 even for someone of my youth, 1970 doesn't seem very long ago at all.

So we've got to get a picture here of reliability of what's recorded for us by Luke and Mark for one in their writings of the Gospels and Acts. Well despite the isolation and loneliness and despite being deserted by some, Paul is not in despair here after his preliminary trial and awaiting a final trial.

In verse 17 he says, but the Lord stood by me and gave me strength. He's acknowledging there that the reason why he himself could boldly stand on trial and defend himself by speaking the Gospel is not because he himself happens to be a sort of bravado type person with great stupid boldness but rather because the Lord has given him strength.

He acknowledges that his opportunity to stand for the Gospel on trial is something that the Lord has equipped him for. Now again in those words I think there are echoes of Psalm 22 the psalm used by Jesus at his death a psalm that the psalmist acknowledges that the Lord will stand by him and has done and will do in the future as well.

[15:09] But it also is consistent with what Paul has exhorted Timothy through this letter to be strong in the grace that God gives him. That is Paul has not been exhorting Timothy to sort of summon up his own personal reserves of strength but rather to rely on the power that God gives.

Now if you can remember all the way back to the first sermon in this letter Paul said to Timothy in chapter 1 verse 7 God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power.

So as he exhorts Timothy to be strong in proclaiming the gospel he's urging him to be strong in the power that God supplies. Same thing also in chapter 1 verse 14 he said to Timothy guard the good treasure entrusted to you with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

And then again the beginning of chapter 2 you then my child be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. So what Paul is acknowledging for himself to be true is what he's been exhorting Timothy to realise as well.

Paul has been strong in the strength of the Lord and he's been exhorting Timothy to be strong in the strength of the Lord. Not personal reserves but the Lord's own strength.

[16:30] Even in trial Paul recognises the opportunities he's had for preaching the gospel. So he says in verse 17 not only has the Lord stood by me and given me strength but that the result of that is that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.

Paul has just exhorted Timothy back in verse 2 proclaim the message be persistent in favourable times and unfavourable times. Well when you're on trial facing death it's probably not the most favourable time to preach the gospel when the gospel is the reason for you facing a sentence of death.

But Paul has not shirked from proclaiming the gospel even on trial so he acknowledges that the Lord's giving him strength has led to him keeping on proclaiming the gospel so that even all the Gentiles might hear it indeed in the midst of his own trial.

That's what he's done what he's exhorted Timothy to do. Proclaim the message persistently in good times and in bad in season and out of season. And he finishes verse 17 by saying so I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

Now we might think that that means that he was escaped being fed to the lions in the Colosseum but at this time of Nero's reign it's probably very unlikely that even then Christians were being fed to lions.

[17:56] That seems to have occurred a bit later in Roman history but certainly it would be highly unusual if very rare for a Roman citizen ever to be fed to lions.

That was something reserved for non-Roman citizens. Paul's a Roman citizen that's why he's in Rome and so I don't think he's talking there about a literal escape from being fed to lions as a Christian being persecuted as such.

I think again he's echoing Psalm 22 where the psalmist speaks of being rescued from the mouth of the lion. I think he's there alluding to that psalm speaking of being saved from the evil that is attacking him in a sort of figurative or metaphorical sort of way.

But what he has in mind here is not being saved from death. That is Paul's not on about the Lord rescuing him, keeping him alive, saving him from death.

Death's not a problem for Paul. But rather the rescue that he has in mind is preserving Paul in the faith of the gospel. gospel. That is, under this attack of evil and this unjust trial, there is every opportunity for evil to lead to Paul abandoning the gospel, recanting on his confession of faith.

[19:16] But Paul says that the Lord's strength has kept him in the faith of the gospel and preaching it. That will lead to him dying. That's not the issue for Paul. Rescue for him means being kept in the gospel faith.

So he says in verse 18, the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack. He's not saying there he's confident that he's going to get off, that he's going to escape being put to death for Christian faith.

He's saying the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. You see, the evil attacks are ones that prevent us arriving in God's heavenly kingdom.

That is, they are attacks that lead us to abandoning faith. Paul's not saying that he will be spared the problem of injustice and hardship and suffering and death.

But rather the Lord will rescue him by keeping him in the faith through death so that he arrives in God's heavenly kingdom. That's where Paul's sights are.

[20:18] Arriving in heaven. The beginning of the chapter made that clear because he said in the presence of God and of Jesus Christ who is the judge of the living and the dead and in view of his appearing and his kingdom and Paul here is looking to that kingdom and he knows that he has to die to arrive there.

Death's not the problem. The problem is whether he will be faithful to the end in the faith of the gospel and he's confident that God will keep him faithful. In effect what he's saying here is what he said back in chapter 1 in those glorious words when he says, I know the one in whom I have put my trust and I am sure that he's able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

That's what Paul's saying here. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack means God will guard me to that day when I arrive in the heavenly kingdom. It is in the Lord's strength that I will be faithful to the gospel he says to the bitter end even to death so that beyond death I arrive in God's heavenly and glorious kingdom.

These words that the Lord will rescue me from every evil may even allude to the Lord's prayer where we pray deliver us from evil. When we pray that prayer maybe in our minds we think in terms of being spared difficulty or hardship or conflict or illness or bad things happening to us generally.

But what I think Jesus has in mind in that prayer as Paul does here is not not that evil things won't happen to us but rather that evil things will not prevail against us leading us to abandon our faith in Jesus Christ.

[21:59] That's the issue. So when we pray deliver us from evil and bad things happen it's not because God's not answering our prayer. The issue is will we be faithful through the evil attacks so that we with Paul will one day arrive at God's heavenly kingdom.

That's what we ought to mean when we pray deliver us from evil. That's what Jesus meant and that's what Paul certainly means here. See there's never any guarantee in the Bible that Christians will escape hardship or that Christians will escape opposition or persecution.

Indeed we're promised it many times. There's never a promise that evil will not fiercely attack us. Indeed we're told that it will if we're faithful to the gospel. There's never any certainty that Christians will not suffer unjustly in this life.

Indeed most likely we will. But there is every assurance and every confidence that we can have that God will guard us under attacks of evil and difficulty and strife for the final day.

That he will keep us faithful by his power so that we arrive in God's heavenly kingdom on that day. And it's that certainty that sustains Paul here. Not our vain hope that somehow he'll be spared death.

[23:12] but rather that he'll be faithful to the end of his life to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And then he has every confidence that he will arrive in God's heavenly kingdom.

That's why he's been exhorting Timothy as we saw last week to exercise his ministry fully. That is persevere to the end of your life in the faith of the gospel.

Those were the last words of verse 5 that we saw last week. Remember how last week's passage and this last chapter began. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and in view of his appearing and his kingdom I solemnly urge you proclaim the message.

Carry out your ministry fully. And in the presence of that same God and Christ and in view of that same Jesus appearing and bringing his kingdom Paul can stand with confidence and say in verse 6 and 7 I am already being poured out as a libation for the time and the time of my departure has come.

I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Being poured out as a libation does not mean that Paul sees himself as a sacrifice.

[24 : 32] It's an offering. An offering of his whole life to God in service of the gospel. He's saying that his life is at an end. It's poured out now in effect as a libation offering to God.

His departure is near. An odd word that means release. Paul sees death not as a door or an obstacle to overcome but rather something that opens itself into heavenly life.

It is an opportunity, a release from this world into God's heavenly kingdom. And he declares with confidence but not arrogance that he has fought the fight, run the race and kept the faith.

Confidence because he knows that it is God's strength that has enabled him to do that. That's why it's not arrogance. It's not the boast of a modern sports star saying how good they are when they're on the top of the victory podium.

But rather the humble confidence that it is Jesus' strength that has enabled Paul to finish the race. He's fought the good fight he says because he's wrestled for the gospel's sake.

[25 : 37] He's not sat by idly when the gospel is under attack but rather he's jumped in boots and all for the sake of the gospel to fight for the truth of the gospel when it's under attack from false teachers as we've seen in this letter.

There ought to be encouragement to us here not to sit by when we see the gospel being abused but rather be prepared to contend for it. He's run the race. He doesn't say he's won the race.

That's not the issue. Christian life is not a competition but he's finished the race because finishing does matter. It's easy to start well. It's much harder to finish well.

Paul is saying now at the end of his life and his ministry he has finished the race of the Christian life and the Christian ministry and he's kept the faith and that's why evil hasn't prevailed because if evil had prevailed he wouldn't have kept the faith he would have wandered off into myths like those false teachers he warned against in chapter 3.

He would have abandoned the truth of the gospel and of Jesus Christ but not Paul. He's been faithful to the end though it costs him his life. It also opens the way to God's heavenly kingdom.

[26 : 49] But more than that when Paul was converted on the road to Damascus so stunningly many years before this he was taken into Damascus to a man called Ananias and to Ananias Jesus spoke these words about Paul.

He said, Paul is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.

I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. From the time of his conversion that was in effect Paul's life task to bring the name of Jesus the gospel before Gentiles that is non-Jews to kings and to the people of Israel and to suffer for the gospel.

So now at the end of his life and finally in Rome where he now has had a preliminary trial and faces a future trial before Caesar Paul's ministry commission is complete.

He's brought the gospel to the people of Israel many of whom rejected it. He's brought the gospel to Gentiles in town and city after town and city around the Mediterranean world.

[28:11] And now at last he's brought the gospel to kings back in Caesarea to King Herod Agrippa and to the Roman procurator procurator of Judea. And now at last in Rome in effect before Caesar himself.

So that's why he can say that he has run the race. That he's fought the good fight and that he's kept the faith. Because the commission that was given to him after his conversion by Jesus he has indeed carried out fully.

And so then he says that in the presence of God and of Christ who is to judge the living and the dead and in view of his appearing and kingdom he says with confidence in verse 8 there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord the righteous judge will give me on that day.

He doesn't fear Jesus the judge of the living and the dead who is coming one day to judge the world. Not because Paul trusts in himself. Not because he can parade a list of converts and say the places he's been and all the beatings that he's suffered and say look how good I am I can stand before you on judgment day.

Not at all. But he has confidence that he can stand on that day because the Lord's grace and strength has sustained him through his life in the faith of the gospel.

[29:31] Because he knows that he's saved by grace. And because of grace he can stand before the judge. Because he can stand before there with sins forgiven because Jesus has died for him.

That's his confidence. confidence. Not in himself. But in the work of God in Jesus Christ. And that's why he has confidence that a crown of righteousness awaits him.

Not because he's a super apostle. Not because of all the gospel proclamations that he's exercised over 30 years or so. But because Jesus died for him. And his grace is sufficient for him.

Unlike Rome's fickle and unjust judges who will soon sentence Paul to death. He has confidence that before the judge of the living and the dead. This righteous judge. The judge who knows our thoughts and actions.

The judge who is not partial and does not take bribes. The judge who is honest and true in all his judgments. Jesus Christ himself. He has confidence that a crown of righteousness awaits him on the day he faces that judgment throne.

[30:32] And that's worth far more than an athlete's laurel wreath. That a winner of an ancient Olympic event would receive. A laurel wreath that would dry up in a day or two and wither and get brittle and fall apart.

That's not for Paul who doesn't love the world and its glories and riches. But rather the crown of righteousness that will never dull. That will shine for eternity in heaven.

That's worth suffering for. That's worth prison for. That's worth execution for. And Paul knows that it awaits him when one day he dies and meets Jesus the judge. But it's not just for super Christians and apostles like Paul.

It's for all of God's people. For us included. So he says that that crown of righteousness awaits not only him but also all who have longed for his appearing.

Literally all who love his appearing. See there are two things we can love. We can love this world like Demas. We can pursue its laurel wreaths which will dry up and be fragile and fade.

[31:36] Or we can love the appearing of the Lord where the crown of righteousness will be awarded to those who've kept the faith and run the race and fought the good fight. And that is something for each of us to love and long for and with confidence await.

Timothy he says your race is still in progress. Don't stop now. Run the race. Fight the good fight. Keep the faith. Proclaim the message. Day in day out.

They're the same duties that are charged to us at baptism. When after baptism we say keep the faith. Run the race. Fight the good fight.

The same things apply to us as to Paul and as to Timothy. Who then is sufficient for these tasks? It's not just for super apostles like Paul or even like Timothy.

Who will stand on that final day? Not only the great Christians like Paul and Timothy. But you and me too. Who are saved by grace.

[32 : 40] And long for and love the appearing of Christ. You see we all have that same spirit of power not timidity. We all will stand with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

We all can stand. If we are strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And that's why Paul finishes this letter as he does. A word that typifies all he's been on about for years and years.

The last words we have. He says to Timothy the Lord be with your spirit. And grace. Be with you. But it's not you singular.

Timothy though this letter is written to him. But it's written to all those who read this letter. You plural. Grace. Be to you. Because in the end grace is all we need.

Grace is sufficient for us to stand on that final day. And receive a crown of righteousness. For all Christians can stand before the judgment throne of Christ. The judge of the living and the dead.

[33 : 40] Not confident in what we've done at all. But confident in the grace. That is ours. In Christ. Amen.