

Finishing Well

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Preacher: Rev Kenneth I Macleod

[0 : 0 0] Let's turn for a little to the chapter we read, 2 Timothy, chapter 4. Read at verse 6, For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

And then particularly in verse 7, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. I wonder what it will be like for you and me when we come to die.

I suppose it's a question sometimes we ask ourselves, but you may think it's a rather morbid thought. But it is the inevitable that we're all going to face.

I'm sure some of us will know when that time comes that we're going to die. For others, we won't know that we're going to die. Paul knew he was going to die. He was in prison, and he knew he was going to be executed.

What he did know was that he was going to die. What he didn't know was when he was going to die. He knew it was going to be soon, because he really was waiting at this particular time for this execution.

[1 : 1 4] And it's quite amazing when you read this letter, because he's somebody who is on death row, and who knows that his time is short.

And he's not writing sort of a sob story. His great concern is for the church, for the well-being of others.

And he has this great burden in his heart about how things will be after he goes. And so this is part of what we see, just the greatness of the apostle. And also there's no hint of resentment or bitterness about him, because again you'd say to yourself, surely it would be very easy to become quite bitter and resentful, because here is this apostle who has devoted, since he became a Christian, he's devoted his life to serving the Lord.

And he spent quite a lot of that time in prison. And you would say to yourself, if you were locked away there waiting to die, it would be very easy to say, Lord, this is just so, so unfair.

I have given my all, I've given my life to serve you. And this is what I get, stuck in the prison. But you see, Paul knew that God works all things.

[2 : 3 9] All things. Not just the things we understand, but everything. All things together for good to his people. And that's quite an amazing thing. Sometimes we will see that, sometimes we won't.

And Paul had seen enough of life to understand the truth of that. Paul wrote these words in Romans, again through the inspiration of God's Spirit. But Paul had discovered that himself.

Remember how he was thrown into the prison in Philippi. And in that prison, remember how the jailer came to faith. Because he asked that great question, which has been probably asked so often, and the great answer that Paul gave, what must I do to be saved?

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved. How did Paul end up in prison? Well, remember how Paul was wanting to go in one direction, and he was given this vision of a man beckoning him to come over in the way of Macedonia.

And so Paul took this as God's leading, God's guidance, and said, Oh, well, I'm not going to go the way I planned. I'm going to go this way. And so that's what he did. And he ended up in prison.

[3 : 54] And I'm sure if I was in Paul's shoes, I'd be saying to myself, either I got this seriously wrong, I have totally and completely misunderstood God's guidance, or if God has guided me here, why on earth have I ended up in prison?

This is so unfair. But we know Paul was in prison simply for one reason, because God had to deal with somebody. There was somebody needing saved in the prison.

And maybe there was more than that jailer that was saved, because we know that in the prison at midnight, Paul and Silas began singing praises to God. Remember, they had been beaten up, badly beaten up, and they were fastened, their feet and their hands, they were chained in the prison.

And yet they were singing praise to God. The other prisoners would have heard that. They'd be saying, Whoa, who are these men? And then, of course, when the earthquake came, and the prison doors were opened, the jailer was going to kill himself, because he thought all the prisoners would have escaped.

And Paul said, Do yourself no harm. And then he asked, What must I do to be saved? So Paul knew from his own personal experience, as well as from the inspiration of God's word coming to him in order that he would write this, that all things work together for good.

[5 : 28] Another time when Paul was in prison, writing to the church in Philippi, he said, You know, this imprisonment is working for the spread of the gospel, because people were coming to faith in the prison.

Maybe it was some of the prison guards, but people, the gospel was being spread. The gospel was flourishing in the prison because of Paul. So Paul knew that even from a human point of view, that although everything seemed to be going against, and nothing making sense, and it was painful, and hurtful, and all these things, God was at work.

And it's one of the lessons we must always learn. God is always at work. Always at work. And sometimes God will touch you in order to touch somebody else.

Because we often just look at our own lives, and we're caught up with our own lives, and we think, Well, this is it. But God is a big picture. God is working in everybody's life.

And sometimes in order to reach somebody else, he has to do something in you. That's sometimes the way it works. And that's why we have to leave things in God's hand, and often just keep quiet.

[6 : 52] Because God, God is at work. God is always at work. And he's doing things. And it's only the great eternity that will show us just how incredibly he worked, often in ways that seem to be going against anything we could understand.

But so, here's Paul, and he knows that his days are about over. And he says in verse 6, For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

So Paul is looking at his life as a drink offering being poured out. And of course, Paul, being steeped in the old Levitical ways and understanding of the Old Testament, saw his life like the drink offering that was being poured out by the sacrifice.

That was part of the whole ritual. There was this drink offering being poured out. And that's the way he saw his life. Not just in the immediate, this is not just referring to his death, but it's referring to his life in all that has happened to him and all that God is doing within him.

Because the Apostle Paul, from the time that he became a Christian, he lived the most dedicated, consecrated life that you'll find really anywhere.

[8 : 11] He was somebody who lived completely to and for the Lord. Now, of course, when we become Christians, that's how we ought to live. Because Jesus himself has said that discipleship is taking up the cross, it is denying yourself, and it is following him.

And we know that. And there is, the moment you become a Christian, something of that immediately begins to happen within you. But of course, as we go through life, we have to confess that so often, and that's part of our prayer, our repentant prayer.

Lord, I do not follow you as I should. Lord, I do not deny myself as often as I should.

Lord, I sometimes am hesitant to take up that cross. I see that cross, and I recoil from it, and I go away. And far too often, as we look at our lives, we see that we have failed.

It's not that we aren't taking up a cross. It's not that we are never denying ourselves. It's not that we aren't following the Lord. But we're not doing it as we know we should, and the way that often we want to.

[9 : 28] And so it's part of our repentant prayer to the Lord is just in this very thing that we're not as we should be or as we would want to be. But the apostle, as he comes to the end of his life, he looks back, and we'll see that in a moment.

There's just this amazing sense of who he has been and what he has done. But the apostle had, as we say, this incredible commitment to the Lord all the time.

And so he is able to say, I have been poured out. My life has been won of being poured out. And when you read the testimony of Paul, and we read it in different places throughout his letters, it's quite an extraordinary thing.

In fact, the Lord said at the very beginning that he was going to suffer a lot for his name. And Paul most certainly did. And I'm sure sometimes on a day like this, as we come unto the word, and we're challenged by the word, and the word should always be challenging us.

Maybe at this very point we're thinking, you know, I ought to be a better Christian than I am. But you know, far too often we're tomorrow Christians.

[10 : 44] we're going to sort this out tomorrow. And you say to the Lord, Lord, see tomorrow, when I go to work, when I do, I'm going to be different.

But the Lord says, no, it's today. Start today. Sort this out today. It's the very same as so many people say to themselves, they'll start seeking the Lord tomorrow. How often we've sat in church, well, I used to so often, and I would say, I must seek the Lord.

And I would use these words, I must, not I will, but I must. And there's a big difference between saying, I must and I will.

Because if you're saying, I will seek the Lord, you're going to do it now. I must, and I was able to say, start seeking the Lord, and I would leave it and say, well, I'll maybe begin tomorrow or next week.

I've got too much on this week or this month or maybe even this year, but I, oh, I have every intention of seeking the Lord and getting right with the Lord. That's my big intention.

[11 : 50] And you know, an awful lot of people go through life with this intention of seeking the Lord. I don't think people come to church without the intention of seeking the Lord. But you know, you can have that intention all your life and never do anything about it.

And that's what we talk about the tomorrow, the tomorrow seeking, the tomorrow, because it's got to be now. The Bible always speaks to us in the terms, in these terms, in the present.

Today, harden not your heart. Now is the accepted time. Now is the day of salvation. But Paul, as he's looking at the situation, he talks about now his leaving and he says, the time of my departure has come, the time of his exodus, the time of his departure.

departure. And he's seeing himself that he's going to be leaving this world. And I think we often highlight the different descriptions that are given, but two of the main ideas caught in this word departure are the untying of the ropes of a boat.

When the boat is going to set sail, you untie the ropes and away it goes. And that's one of the ideas that the Apostle Paul has here. The time of the setting sail of myself out from time into eternity.

[13 : 17] The time has come for me to leave this world and go out into the great eternity. That's the way he's seeing it, the time of my departure. Again, the other picture that we have is of taking down a tent, folding it up and moving on.

And Paul, of course, often refers to this body of ours as a tent. In 2 Corinthians, you'll find him saying how our earthly tent, that's talking of our body, will have to be taken down.

And Paul wasn't looking forward to this part of being unclothed where he would be without a body. Because he knew that as you enter into glory, that's how you'll be without the body.

Of course, the body will be reunited later. It's one of the things we cannot fathom. How do we function? I don't know. How do we function without the body in glory as we go?

Remember my late father, before he died, in the last year or two of his life, he was always talking about that. He says, I can't, I can't figure it out because we're so earthly, we're so bound in the here and the now and the physical.

[14 : 28] And I know that our worship of the Lord is spiritual, but I can't imagine how we simply, how we function, and it will be until the resurrection without the body.

And Paul himself says that he wasn't looking forward to that, he's longing to be clothed again. But he also knows that it is a matter of when death comes, of departing to be with the Lord, which he said was far better.

So Paul was looking forward to what followed on, and yet there's this part where not looking forward to having to leave your body, but it's only for a while.

And then Paul says, as he's looking ahead, he says, I have fought a good fight. And Paul, he was able to look back over his life.

And he was able to look back over his life with great thankfulness. Because he had fought a good fight. Now, not every fight that is to be fought is a good fight.

[15 : 39] A lot of fights are not good fights. But this was a good fight. The cause was a good fight. And the apostle was able to look back over his life and say, you know, I fought a good fight.

Now, the apostle wasn't saying, my whole life was a great life. Because there was a lot of Paul's previous life he was utterly ashamed of.

Absolutely. Paul labelled himself the chief of sinners. That's what Paul said. You know, he said, you can go anywhere in the world and you can find, and we're all sinners, but I'll tell you something, he said, I am the chief.

Why did he say that? It was because Paul was brought up with the word, he was brought up with the best of teaching in the word of God.

He sat under the best teachers. If anybody had a knowledge of the word of God and of the truth of God, it was the apostle Paul when he was Saul.

[16 : 45] What did he do with it? He hated Jesus Christ with a passion. because he did not believe in that Jesus Christ had come, the Messiah had come.

And he put all his energy, and he was a man of incredible strength and energy, he put all his energy and all his great ability into persecuting the church.

We're told in Acts that he was breathing, his very breath was slaughter against the church. He was responsible for the death and the imprisonment of men and women, boys and girls.

That weighed on the apostle's heart all his life. Couldn't but. When you think, when he looked back, and that's why he said, I was the chief of sinners.

I was a murderer. I was a blasphemer. But he said, God had mercy on me. Isn't that wonderful? God had mercy on me.

[17 : 50] That's what we've always got to hone in on. The mercy of God. We haven't even begun to understand how merciful God is. Here is this man who spent every ounce of his energy persecuting the church, hating Christ, trying to destroy anything and everything to do with the Lord Jesus Christ.

And yet God has mercy upon him. Isn't that wonderful? And that's the kind of God, that is the God that we come to today. That's the God that we worship, this merciful God.

So Paul found this mercy, and he couldn't stop praising God for his mercy, for his love, for what he had done to him. And so he says, I have fought the good fight.

He has fought this fight. He couldn't fight it in his own strength, and neither can you or I. The moment we do, we fail. Have you ever tried making resolutions in the Christian life and saying, right, this is what I'm going to do.

I will this, I will that, I will the next thing. It's not going to happen. Ends in failure, doesn't it? What we have to say is, Lord, I need to sort this out.

[19 : 06] Help me. I can't do it myself. You're going to have to give me your strength. You're going to have to give me your grace. You're going to have to give me the desire to overcome because I can't do it on my own.

And that is the way we go forward. It's not I going to this, I'm going, Lord, you've got to help me with this. Yes, of course, there has to be a commitment from ourselves.

And so we fight in this world. We fight against the world. When we talk about the world, we're talking about all that is opposed to God, all the philosophy of this world that is opposed to God.

And we've got to remember that there is so much opposition, and it's so subtle, it is so powerful. And the world comes in different ways to us, and sometimes the world will entice us and throw us aside.

Remember in the parable of the sower, we're told that it was the world that choked the good seed. So be careful of the world. It's an enemy of God.

[20 : 15] And so we have to fight against this. We've also, I suppose one of the difficulties as Christians is that the world is present. We're living in it.

Now we're not fighting against where we live as such, but we're fighting against the spirit of the world, spirit of the age, the attitudes, the godless, humanistic, atheistic philosophy that has infiltrated so much of life and so much of thinking, and it's so easy to embrace, because we're living in the present, heaven is in the future, and here we are.

So sometimes it's a real struggle, fighting against the world. But we also fight against the flesh, against the inward corruptions that are within ourselves.

And we all have. and bubbling away within our heart, there are so many things that pull us away from God. And for some people it'll be certain things more than others.

We're all different, we have different personalities, but the seed of every conceivable sin lies within your own heart. Maybe you don't think that. Maybe you say to yourself, well I battle against this and that and the next thing, but oh there's lots of things that don't affect me at all.

[21 : 34] You don't know your heart, I don't know my heart. Because very often what we diagnose ourselves is as a result of something that's much more deep rooted, much more subtle, that's working away within us.

You might say to yourself, I'll tell you something, I'm not idolatrous in any shape or form. Well, if we ever covet anything that anybody has, if there's ever that spirit of covetousness, of that kind of jealousy that we have of somebody, we're guilty of idolatry.

That's what Paul tells us. Paul tells us that covetousness is idolatry. So you see how subtle sin is, that sometimes things that we think, oh I'm not guilty of, actually we are deep down.

And that's why it's so important that we examine ourselves in light of God's word, not just according to how we feel. So we have this battle against ourselves and all the corruption that's within us.

And we have, of course, a battle then against the evil one who's always out to devour, always wanting to hurt us, to destroy us, to ruin our credibility, to destroy our profession.

[22 : 55] All these things. He wants to take away our joy in the Lord. You know, when you come to church today, the enemy of your souls hasn't left you.

He's here as well. He doesn't want you to have joy, Christian joy. He wants you to be miserable. He wants you to be looking out at others and saying, ah, you know, it's far better for them.

See, these people who aren't Christians, they've got an easy life of it. See, since you started following the Lord, you've had nothing but hassles and trouble. He'll tell you that. He'll say it was far better before.

And so he's always whispering, whispering, trying to draw us aside, take us away. If you aren't a Christian, if you're interested in becoming a Christian, if you're privately beginning to seek the Lord, he'll be whispering to you.

Now, don't get too serious about that. In fact, you're a Christian already. Because you believe that God is. You believe some of the things in the Bible.

[23 : 58] In fact, you believe all the Bible. You're fine. Just leave it. You don't need to go into all those personal relationships with the Lord Jesus. That's what he'll be telling you.

It's lies. Because remember, he's been a liar from the start. So we're warring against all these things. But then it tells us, I have finished the race.

And again, Paul was always using athletic analogies to highlight things. And Paul's particular race was set out before him by God.

You have a particular race that is set out before you by God. And how are we to run this race? We're to run it with patience. That's what we're told in Hebrews. Let us run the race that is set before us.

And it's quite possible that as you run your race, you do what runners often do. And particularly when you see children in a race, particularly primary school children, or young primary school children, they're very often as they're running, they're running sideways.

[25 : 07] Well, they're not running sideways, but they're running, but their heads are sideways because they're looking at where others are. And sometimes people who are winning a race end up not winning it because they've been too busy looking at where others are.

But you know, in the Christian life, in the Christian race, sometimes we do that as well. And we're looking at others and we're saying, ah, I wish I was running their race. Their race seems so much easier than the one that I have to run.

You don't know. There are lots of hidden crosses in people's lives that you and I have no idea about. God has set a particular race for you to run.

And we must run that race well. And that's what the apostle was so conscious of. That he had run his race. And the one thing the apostle, and you know, when you read Paul's testimony about being stoned, you know, he was taken out of cities and not just kicked, given a good kicking.

He was battered and stoned and left for dead. He was shipwrecked. He was imprisoned. He was beaten up so often. And you know what the apostle said?

[26 : 21] It would have been very easy for the apostle to say, I'm out of this now. You know, I can't take any more. But you know what he said? My grace is sufficient for you.

Paul had learned that. And that's what we need to learn as we run this race. And then we see, finally, just rushing on, there's a faith to be kept.

I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. A faith to be kept. And we can add, we are kept in that faith.

Do you know, it's a great thing. You and I couldn't keep ourselves in the faith one day were it not for God's keeping. He is the one who keeps us. It's one of my favorite words in the Bible.

Kept. No matter where we go, no matter what we do, no matter what we become, we are kept. Our soul is kept by the Lord.

[27 : 17] And he will not, he will not let go. Death can't break that. That's the amazing thing. Death cannot sever the keeping of the soul from the Lord.

The Lord says, no one shall pluck them out of my hand. So the moment you become a Christian, no matter what happens to you, no matter how dark your circumstances, remember this, you're still kept.

We are kept, how? By the power of God. And to salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time. That's what we do. Kept by the power of God. So, while we can say, I have kept the faith, you have to be, have to acknowledge, I, but I was kept in that faith.

And that's exactly what the Lord has done. Kept by the power of God. The idea of this, though, in this particular sentence of Paul's declaration, where he says, I have kept the faith, is more the idea.

Yes, we acknowledge that God is the one who has kept us, but he is saying, I have kept. It's like you're guarding a deposit that's been given to you by somebody. Somebody says, hey, here's something, this is really precious, and I want you to look after it, keep it safe, till I come for it again.

[28 : 41] And that's really what's happening. That's the kind of idea. Because we are saved. Remember how it tells us in Ephesians, by grace you are saved through faith.

Everything is by faith. We begin by faith. We follow the Lord by faith. Everything we believe, everything we believe is by faith.

We believe the world was created by God. We believe that by faith. Everything is by faith. We live by faith, and we will die by faith.

Everything, it's faith all the way. Every single step of the way. And so the apostle is able to say, I have kept the faith. faith. I hope that each one of us here is first of all, as we look at this, that you are running this race.

I hope you're not in here today, and you're saying to yourself, you know, I haven't the first clue what he's talking about. faith. Because I, I'm not running any race.

[29 : 48] I don't have any faith to keep. I think probably there might be people in here today, and maybe somebody said to you, are you a Christian?

You might be saying, well, I don't really know. If I ask again, I say, would you like to be a Christian? And you say, yes, how much would you like to be a Christian?

I'd like to be a Christian more than anything else. That is what I really, really want. Well, I believe that somebody whose heart is speaking in that way is somebody who is already beginning to be in the faith.

Because the natural heart, although we might be interested in the things of God, and there might be a desire after the things of God, to really, really, really want to be a Christian above anything else in the whole wide world, says to me that you are already, your foot is already within the kingdom.

Because that is not a natural desire. It tells us in Isaiah that people looking at Christ, they saw no beauty in him, that they should desire him. There was no desire in their heart.

[31 : 10] But if that desire is in your heart, and it's a growing desire. And you want to, in fact, I'll finish it with this. It tells us here, they've kept the faith.

The righteous judge, I'm not going to look at this just now. henceforth there is laid up 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 love disappearing.

What does the reappearance of the Lord Jesus Christ mean to you today? The fact he is coming again. How would you feel if, as we came out of church today, that we saw Jesus coming again?

Because he's going to come, and everybody's going to see him. Would you be saying, oh no! Or would you be saying, ah, wonderful, even so come, Lord Jesus, you are the one that I want.

Well, if that's how you're saying, you are the one that I want, let me tell you, you are already in the faith. You couldn't have that desire unless you couldn't have that longing, you couldn't have that within your heart, unless your heart was already moving, having begun to move towards the Lord.

[32 : 33] Otherwise, you'd be saying, oh no! Well, if you today have just even a little faith, if today you're just, you're trotting, in fact, you're only walking, you're not running, but you're just walking.

In fact, you're walking with a limp, you're walking really slowly. In fact, you're taking little baby steps. That doesn't matter. Well, it does to a certain extent, but the fact is, you're running the race.

You are on the right track. And even if you're taking your first step, there always has to be a first step. Make sure that your steps quicken, and that it won't be long till you'll actually be running.

Let us pray. Oh, Lord, our God, we give thanks for your word, for its encouragement, for its challenge. We give thanks, Lord, that you are the God who are, you're over everything and over everybody.

And all things are in your control and you work all things together for good. How wonderful that is. That is our great encouragement in a world that is so full of pain and sorrow and confusion and darkness to know that the God who is light will bring light out of the darkness and it will work all things well.

[33 : 51] Take us to our home safely, we pray. Blessed cup of tea, coffee in the hall afterwards. Watch over us in everything, forgiving us our sin in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to conclude singing in Psalm 71 from the Scottish Psalter.

Psalm number 71 from the Scottish Psalter. And we're going to sing verses 14 to 17. The tune is Stathcathro.

Psalm 71 and at verse 14. That's on page 311. But I with expectation will hope continually and yet with praises more and more I will they magnify.

Thy justice and salvation my mouth abroad shall show even all the day for either of the numbers do not know. And I will constantly go on in strength of God the Lord.

Thine own righteousness, even thine, alone I will record. Verses 14 to 17. The tune is Stathcathro. But I with expectation will hope continually.

[34 : 58] But I with expectation will hope continually and yet with praises more and more I will be magnified.

I will be magnified. By conscience and salvation my word abroad shall show in all the day for I bear on the love of God.

The love of God do not know. And I will constantly go on in strength of God the Lord.

and I will be magnified. And I will be magnified. And I will be magnified. I have prepared the wonders thou hast taught.

Now may the grace, mercy, and peace of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rest and abide upon each one of you now and forevermore. Amen.