

THE PASSING OF THE TORCH

by Ray C. Stedman

This is the time of the year when people are concerned about graduation, the time when seniors move on to bigger and better things, leaving their battered desks, their frustrated teachers, and their schools' academic and athletic honors in someone else's hands. We can all relate to that. All of us remember how thrilled we were when we learned in school that the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. We could not wait to get out and see if it worked in life.

Yes, graduation is a time when we move out into new things. What an appropriate time to examine the great passage in the fourth chapter of Second Timothy, where the Apostle Paul is looking on to his graduation day. Writing to his young son in the faith, Paul exhorts Timothy to certain endeavors in view of the fact that he must soon take Paul's place. That must have been a frightening prospect to Timothy. But some of us, too, must pass on eventually, and leave the work to others. That is what we have before us in this passage.

In the opening words of Chapter 4, Paul, in rather sobering tones, reminded Timothy that although he was ministering in the pagan city of Ephesus, nevertheless he lived and labored in the full view of heaven, in the very presence of God the Father, and of Christ Jesus, the coming Judge of the living and the dead. In that awesome presence, remembering that heaven is watching -- as it is watching all that we do as well -- Timothy is to conduct his work.

Timothy is reminded that he was involved in the most significant work taking place on earth during that 1st century time. We too, if we are Christians, are doing the most significant work taking place in this 20th century today. We are involved in the great enterprises of God, advancing the Kingdom, and completing the foundational work began by our Lord himself in his death and resurrection.

Timothy is also reminded that he must do this because there was very shortly coming a time when truth would seem to disappear from the earth, when error would seem to be triumphant, when men would give themselves to myths and fables which they would follow to their own destruction. We ourselves live in just such an age. This is a time when truth is disappearing, when it is no longer recognized as the fundamental base of social and governmental life, when we too find people following wrong ideas, myths, legends and imaginative fantasies of the human mind which lead them to their own destruction. Because we live in such a time, we need the same encouragement to faith that Timothy needed.

The apostle summarizes this for us in Verse 5 of Chapter 4:

As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. {2 Tim 4:5 RSV}

That really is a summary of many things Paul has said to Timothy through the course of these two letters. These words gather up in very brief form all that he is expecting Timothy to do.

Notice the first thing: "Be steady," Paul says, i.e., be consistent, do not be up one day and down the next, do not be off and on in your Christian commitment. Steadiness always comes from a firm base. Here the apostle is exhorting Timothy to rest upon that firm foundation which will result in a consistent, steady life amidst all the pressures and the countering forces of any day or age.

Surely this is a word we need to hear today. Timothy was exhorted to "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus," {2 Tim 2:1}.

What is your base? We have to ask ourselves every day whether we are resting upon that foundation. Do we have fellowship with the Lord? Are we in communication with him in prayer? Are we learning more of his

mind and thinking through his Word? Are we saturating our thoughts with his thoughts so that we think Christianly about life? That should be our base -- resting upon the relationship we have with a Living Lord who is with us to steady us, to succor us, to help us through times of pressure and danger, to impart to us the wisdom and power we need to live today.

The second thing Paul says to Timothy is, "endure suffering." This has been a frequent theme in this letter. Paul has talked many times about the difficulties and the persecutions that Christians may have to face. He has already exhorted Timothy to "endure hardness as a good soldier of Christ Jesus," (2 Tim 2:3). That is a clear answer to the idea being widely taught today that, when you become a Christian, God smooths everything out for you, that he protects you from all problems and dangers, and does not let you suffer any disappointments. Scripture stands solidly against that. As in this case, Scripture exhorts us to endure hardness, to endure suffering. We used to sing a hymn that asks the question,

Am I a soldier of the cross,
a follower of the Lamb?
And shall I fear to own His cause
or blush to speak His name?
Must I be carried to the skies
on flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize
and sailed through bloody seas?

Many Christians feel that way today, that something is wrong if they have any trouble, any difficulty in their life. But the apostle faithfully reminds us that there will be trouble, that those who seek to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. The reason, of course, is that Christianity is a counter-culture movement; it is against the trend of the day and the spirit of the age. If we are going to live in faithfulness to what we believe, then we will experience some rejections, some difficulties, some pressure, and even some persecution. That hymn goes on to say,

Sure I must fight, if I would reign;
increase my courage, Lord;
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
supported by Thy Word.

That is the Christian life.

The third thing the apostle says to Timothy is, "Do the work of an evangelist."

For a long time, I confess, I thought that that was Paul's identification of Timothy's spiritual gift. But I have had to change my mind on that. An evangelist is one who has a special gift and skill in speaking to non-Christians and leading them to Christ, but I find nothing in these letters to Timothy to confirm that that was Timothy's gift. He apparently was a rather timid young man, fearful, inclined to keep to himself. Paul has to urge him to mix with others, to face public life, etc. Rather it appears Timothy had the gift of a pastor-teacher; he seems to fit that mold much better. The apostle gives him several instructions as to how to exercise that gift in the churches of Ephesus.

But why then does Paul say, "Do the work of an evangelist?" He does so because all the gifts must ultimately be directed to the world as well as to the church. The church is in this world in order to teach it the truth about life and about God, and to offer to the world the good news about forgiveness and healing in Jesus' name. That is the work of the church -- to reach the world.

I am thrilled about the new ministry the Lindstedts have undertaken of reaching out to refugees from Southeast Asia. These refugees come from Buddhist backgrounds, and from other faiths, they cannot even speak English, and yet laid on this couple's hearts is a concern to reach them and to teach them. That is not necessarily the gift of an evangelist, but it is doing the work of an evangelist, using the gifts that we have. This is the thrust of the apostle's reminder to Timothy. We are to reach out to the waiting world around.

Finally, Paul says, "fulfill your ministry." He means by that, do not quit until the end, keep on until you have done all that the Lord has sent you to do. You have reached that time when the Lord takes you home; that is the end of your ministry.

I have always been sensitive about the word retirement. I do not like it. When I suggested a couple of years ago that I might be changing my base of operations from Palo Alto to southern Oregon, the word went out that I was retiring. Everywhere I travel around the country now, somebody will say to me, "How are you enjoying your retirement?" No, I am not retired, and I hope I never do retire in that sense. Although it is perfectly proper for those who grow older -- which I perhaps will some day -- to slow down a bit, and take time to do other things, we must never forget that we have a ministry until we die. Our ministry is to be a Christian, to live as a Christian, to walk and talk as a Christian wherever we are, whatever we do.

In the 20th chapter of Acts it is recorded that, when Paul was in Ephesus, several years before he wrote this last letter, he himself prayed with the Ephesian elders and said to them these words about himself,

I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and fulfill the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. {cf, Acts 20:24 RSV}

That was said several years before this letter was written. Paul thought then that he was about to reach the end of his life. And it is true -- when he went up to Jerusalem he was arrested, put in prison and eventually taken to Rome. From there, some years later, he writes to Timothy and urges him to stay with it to the end. That is the test of reality in the Christian life. Anybody can look well for a while, but it is those who endure to the end, those who manifest the basic change of their hearts that they are born again, who have possessed the life of Jesus.

So the apostle urges Timothy to fulfill his ministry. He does so because, as he goes on to say, in effect, "You must take my place."

For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. {2 Tim 4:6 RSV}

The clear implication is that Paul is passing the torch on to this younger man. Timothy would never be an apostle. He was a representative of Paul in Ephesus. The Word of God being written down, the New Testament was rapidly taking the place of the apostles in the world, so Timothy would never fill the shoes of an apostle. But he was nevertheless to carry on the apostolic ministry, as all of us are also called to do.

The end has come for Paul. In these famous words he describes his view of his own death and of what lies beyond. "I am already," he says, "on the point of being sacrificed. The time of my departure has come":

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing. {2 Tim 4:7-8 RSV}

What wonderful words! We all thrill as we read them, hoping that some day we can say them of ourselves.

Notice the way the apostle uses two interesting words to describe his outlook on death: "I am on the point of being sacrificed" (it has, in a sense, already begun); and, "the time of my departure has come."

The "sacrifice" is a reference to the drink offering which in the Jewish feasts terminated the great Day of Atonement. At the end of all the offerings, a drink offering, a jug of wine, was poured out upon the altar. Paul sees himself in that way. Perhaps he knows that he is about to be beheaded. That was the Roman method of execution for those who were Roman citizens. Others were crucified, but citizens had the right to be beheaded if they were to be executed. So Paul, according to tradition, was taken out and had his head laid on a block and an executioner with an axe or a sword severed his head. Paul saw the pouring out of his blood as a drink offering.

He seems to have no regrets at all about this. He does not view it as a disaster, a thing to be feared. He sees it as a normal outcome of the kind of life he lived, a sacrificial life so to be poured out as a sacrifice is a fitting conclusion.

I do not know whether I should add this personal note, but I have always thought that being beheaded would be a wonderful way to die as a Christian. There is an audience present, and one is the center of attention. The end is very quick, relatively painless, and conclusive. It seems to me to be a wonderful way to go home to glory. I do not think Paul looked toward this with any dread whatsoever, but with expectation and thankfulness that his death could be like his ministry, a pouring out of himself on behalf of others.

The second word Paul employs is one that is used of soldiers when they pull up their tent-stakes and leave. The word is also used in Greek literature of a ship that looses its moorings and sets out to sea. Surely that is the most beautiful figure the apostle could employ: "The time of my loosing has come." He will be set free from earthly ties to sail out on a new adventure in life. What a wonderful view of death that is! There is no fear on the apostle's part, no regrets over his termination as a sacrifice, but a sense of adventure as he sails out into a new experience of life with Christ. "To depart and to be with Christ ... is far better," he says in Philippians {Phil 1:23}.

Then Paul uses three phrases which sum up his life's accomplishments. What would you say about your life if you were looking back and summing up in brief words what had been accomplished?

Here are the apostle's words:

First, he says, "I have fought the good fight." It is very important to see he did not say, "I have fought *a* good fight," as he is often quoted as saying. If he had said that it would be indicative of his view of how well he had done. It would be boasting: "I've fought a good fight. I've pitched in there and done the right thing." But that is not what he says. He says, "I have fought *the* good fight," i.e., the significant fight, the great battle which life had presented to him.

Paul sees that battle as the one he describes so vividly in Ephesians 6: "We wrestle not," he says, "against flesh and blood [people are not basically our problem] but with principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places," {Eph 6:12 KJV}. In other words, Paul sees himself as having been grappling with these malevolent, clever, deceitful beings who are constantly at work in human life to interject lies and attractive fantasies to delude us, deceive us, and to lead us into sin. That is where his battling has been going on. And it is not merely a mind trip. It is something that involved the apostle in persecution, in beatings and stonings, in hardships. But it is all part of the battle, and now he has finished it.

Paul sees it as having been a tough, hard fight, but at last he has reached the end. "I have fought the good fight," he says.

I am sure most of you are saying to yourselves, "I hope I can say that when I get to the end." Yes, life is a battle against invisible forces, clever, malicious masters of human psychology who know how to manipulate us, deceive us, twist us and lead us into destruction. That is the battle we are facing.

Paul says, "I have finished the race." That is another common figure in his writings. In Philippians 3 he describes that race: "Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus," he says {Phil 3:13b-14 RSV}.

The race, of course, is the Christian life itself, which is lived moment-by-moment, just as a race is run step-by-step. The question is whether you live each step in the flesh or in the Spirit, whether you are walking in the power of the new life you have from Christ, or whether you are still running in the old ways of thinking, the old self-centered, fleshly, self-serving attitudes. Every moment is either contributing to reaching the goal for the prize or delaying it, wasting time in the flesh. Christians are called to run that race.

The goal is the end of the race -- the death of the believer. Paul has reached that goal. That is why he says, "I have finished the race. I have come to the end." The prize, which he mentions in Philippians 3, is the new body, the resurrected life, the glory that awaits. (He will say more about that in a moment.) The hope of every Christian is that he is not running vainly, not running to get through life, collect his Social Security and take a cruise around the world, but that he might fulfill his ministry, finish the race, and receive the prize which is the glory that awaits him.

Third, the apostle says, "I have kept the faith." He means by that the whole body of truth that is involved in the gospel, what he calls in First Corinthians, "That secret and hidden wisdom of God," {1 Cor 2:7a RSV}. This wisdom is totally different from the wisdom of this world. It is the truth that God tells us about ourselves and about himself, about this world and why it is the way it is. It is the truth about the power of evil, "the mystery of lawlessness" {2 Th 2:7 RSV}, and about "the mystery of godliness" {1 Tim 3:16 KJV} with which we can counteract evil. That is the faith which Paul is talking about. On the very edge of eternity he can say of himself, "I have kept the faith. I have not lost any of the good deposit which God has entrusted to me." He has guarded it as a treasure, and he tells Timothy in turn to "guard the good deposit which has been entrusted to you," {cf, 2 Tim 1:14 RSV}. Paul has kept this treasure from being mistreated or distorted by those who would try to twist it and use it for their own purposes. He has answered its critics. He has warned those who would take it astray, as he does in this very letter, thus he has "kept the faith."

Finally, Paul has dispensed it freely to all. That is God's purpose in giving us this great treasure. Paul says, "I have not shunned to declare unto you the whole counsel of God" -- all the truth that is hidden from the world. Here is where the secrets of life are really found. He ought to be imparting it to everybody with whom we can gain a hearing, helping them to understand themselves and this crazy mixed-up world, the course of history, and the reason for the pressures we are going through. That is the faith which has been imparted to us. I am sure all of you would love to come to that kind of a graduation day where you too can say, "I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith."

Paul now describes in four aspects his expectations at this moment in his life:

Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing. {2 Tim 4:8 RSV}

First, "the crown of righteousness." This is easily misunderstood. Some people have taken this to mean that Paul is not going to be made righteous until he appears before the Lord at this great Day of award. But that is not what this means. Paul has already been made righteous. You cannot read the book of Romans without seeing that the gift of God is righteousness, which is given by faith in Jesus Christ. God makes us righteous at the beginning, not at the end, of our Christian life. So Paul is not waiting for righteousness. Rather he is waiting for the crown, the manifestation of authority and glory, which accompanies righteousness, which is its natural manifestation.

Paul describes that very vividly in other places in terms of the word *glory*. In Second Corinthians 4:17, he says, "This light affliction, which is but for a moment, is laying up for me an eternal weight of glory." That is the crown of which he speaks. Peter says that elders who serve faithfully will be given "a crown of glory" {1 Pet 5:4} when they see the Lord. This is the crown that accompanies righteousness. Righteousness is glorious. God is a glorious Being because he is a righteous Being. So righteousness is the secret of glory. But in this present life that awaits us; we have the righteousness hidden within, but the glory is not visible. That is why John can say, "It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is," {1 Jn 3:2 RSV}. That is the crown of glory that awaits -- the resurrected body, the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

That is unbelievable, indescribable.

These passages always intrigue me when I try to think through what it will mean to have a new body, totally responsive to my spirit, able to do or go or be anywhere at any time, any place, instantly, without difficulty. I will be able to do things I always dreamed of doing -- sing with a tremendous tenor voice that will make the

heavens ring, and hit a golf ball 5,000 miles straight as an arrow down the universe! No, I do not know what it means really, but Paul says there is awaiting him an indescribable weight of glory.

This is to be given him, Paul says, "by the Lord himself, the righteous judge." That last phrase is an intended contrast with Paul's expectation of his forthcoming appearance before Nero, the unrighteous judge, who, after examining this righteous man will nevertheless pronounce him guilty and condemn him to death. But that judgment before the Emperor will shortly be reversed by the Lord himself, who, knowing everything about Paul, will hand him the award, the crown of glory, because he is a righteous man by faith in Jesus Christ.

What a wonderful thing it will be to have the Lord himself hand to us, with the pierced hands that were broken for us, the glory for which we have been waiting all our life. I do not know anything more intriguing than that. This glory is the proper clothing for a spirit that has been made like our Lord's himself, so we share with him that glory.

It is to be given, says Paul, "on that Day." In that indefinite, vague expression, which Scripture frequently uses, there is a reference to the one far off, supreme event toward which God is moving all creation. "That Day" is the day when all that is now invisible to man, realities which cannot be discovered by the scientific mind, will be made visible, and all the earth will see what has been there all along. That is the great Day toward which we are moving, a moment when time gives way to eternity, when all the waiting ends, when "time shall be no more," as the book of Revelation says {cf, Rev 10:6 KJV}. We will no longer be locked into having to wait for something to happen. In eternal conditions there is no waiting. All that we are ready for, all that we are spiritually equipped to handle is given to us. That may be difficult for us to work out in terms of our time-space mentality, nevertheless it is true. Surely this is what our Lord meant when he said those wonderful words, "Let not your heart be troubled," {John 14:1a}. "If I go away I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am there you may be also," {cf, John 14:3 KJV}. That is the Day of which the apostle speaks.

Finally, it is to be shared with others. It is not Paul himself who will have this, but, as he says, "Not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing." Most of the commentators take this to refer to the second coming of Jesus, and for a long time I too thought that. But, in carefully working through this letter, I do not think that that is what Paul means. Some Christians today are not looking forward to the Lord's second coming; some of them are so confused in their eschatology they do not understand the prophetic Scriptures, nor do they even make an effort to do so. Does this passage mean that only those who are eagerly looking for the Lord are going to be given a crown of glory? No, I know many Christians who do not look for the Lord yet they love him deeply. This is referring to the Lord's first appearing, what we read earlier in this letter, "the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel," {cf, 2 Tim 1:10 KJV}. That is why Paul uses the glory, past tense here, "who have loved his appearing."

Do you love his appearing? I am sure, if you are a Christian at all, your heart responds "Yes!" You love the story of Jesus, of his moving about among men, healing the sick, raising the dead, ministering to the heartbroken, touching the empty, lonely lives around him, bringing them to life, vitality, joy and peace; the story of the mystery of the cross, the darkness of it, the strange transgressions that were laid upon him there; the glory of the resurrection, the ministry with the disciples, the story of the ascension, the coming of the Spirit so that Jesus can be with each one of us individually no matter where we are on earth or in time. Do you love that story?

Tell me the old, old story
of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory,
of Jesus and His love.
Tell me the story simply,
as to a little child;
For I am weak and weary,
and helpless and defiled.

If you feel that way, as I do, there is nothing you love better than the story of Jesus' appearing, of the relief he brings to the spirit, the lifting of the load of guilt, the healing of the inner life. All this, Paul says, will occur at that one Day.

All God's people arrive together. That is the mystery of eternity. I know it is hard for us to grasp, but I am convinced that many Scriptures indicate there is no waiting once we depart this earth. Resurrection bodies which lie in the grave for centuries in time are immediately ours in eternity. There is no waiting around in a kind of heavenly bathrobe, waiting for your good clothes to get back from the cleaners. We are with the Lord.

When I go to be with the Lord, I expect to see Wesley and all the rest arriving at the same time, all of us coming together.

"Not to me only, but unto all those who have loved his appearing," Paul says. What a hope that is! The Christian life is entirely different than anything the world has to offer. It is not a mere philosophy of being good to your fellow man. It includes that, but that is not all of it. It is not merely good teaching about some of the intricate mysteries of life, about what happens after death, whether there is a heaven or a hell. It is the whole pattern centered on one Person, the Lord Jesus. He is the One who is the heart, the soul and glory of our Christian faith. The one thing we ought to expect more than anything else is the fulfillment of those promises that we shall be conformed to the image of God's Son.

I love those words in the hymn, *The Sands of Time Are Sinking* :

The bride eyes not her garment,
but her dear Bridegroom's face.
I will not gaze at glory
but on my King of grace.
Not at the crown He giveth,
but on his pierced hands,
For the Lamb is all the glory
of Emmanuel's land.

That was Paul's expectation. How it ought to undergird our own hearts!

It has been said of Christianity that it is pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. But let me tell you something: If you do not have the hope of glory you have nothing to nerve your endeavor and stimulate you now. If you do not have the expectation that God is working out great purposes in which you will have a part, your life will be cold, dead, lifeless and nerveless at this present time. It is the hope that we have that stimulates us and steadies us. May God help us to always be steady, to endure suffering, to do the work of an evangelist, and to fulfill our ministry.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for these encouraging words from the mighty apostle's heart. How they do steady us as we think about them and relate ourselves to them. Thank you for showing us that we too can live triumphantly in this present world. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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