

2Timothy No. 2**2 Timothy 1:8-18****May 26, 2013****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Second Timothy is one of Paul's most personal letters. I mean that in it he talks a good deal about himself and his life. There is no surprise in that; he was writing to one of his closest friends. But it is a reminder that human life is a story. It has a beginning and it has an end. All who walk with God have a story to tell: a story of their meeting the Lord perhaps, but always a story of God's faithfulness, of the particular twists and turns of his or her pilgrimage, of lessons learned, of defeats and triumphs, and of what all of this had to do with the great story: the salvation of the world. We hear snippets of those stories from time to time on a Sunday evening near the end of a month and we never tire of them because no two are the same. And yet, different as they are, they *are* all the same in that way in which every Christian's life must be the same because all our lives are all taken up into that one great story of the salvation of the world. Rich or poor, male or female, adult convert or covenant child, healthy or sick, famous or of little note, every Christian life is thus an adventure on a grand scale, if only we can see it for what it truly is. It is this shared experience of something far larger than ourselves that makes the life of the long ago apostle so instructive for us and so inspiring. What happened to him will happen to us; what he experienced we will experience; because Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever and because the story of salvation is still the story of the world.

Text Comment

- v.8 Paul would not have bothered to tell Timothy not to be ashamed of the gospel unless he knew how sorely tempted we can be to be embarrassed about being Christians. When he wrote to the Romans, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of the gospel..." (Rom. 1:16) he was as much as admitting that he was and we all are subject to that very temptation. For the same reason the Lord Jesus warned us that those who were ashamed of him and his words would find that he was likewise ashamed of them. [Mark 8:38] We don't like to admit it, but we are all desperate to be liked and accepted and so we worry about what people will think of us if we wear our loyalty to Jesus Christ on our sleeve, if we are too obvious about our Christian faith. We can be embarrassed about the gospel itself -- so alien to the thinking of most people today -- we can be embarrassed by our fellow Christians -- the things they say and the things they do -- and we can, God forgive us, be ashamed of Christ himself precisely because he is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords and the Savior of sinners, titles we know full well seem ridiculous to so many of Christianity's cultured despisers.

Florence and I were listening to a comedian on Netflix the other evening and near the end of his routine he made fun of the Christian witness of Jesus Christ to others and the fact that he did so confirms what all of us know anyway: people aren't going to thank us to bring up the Lord Jesus Christ and salvation in his name. They are not going to admire us, they're certainly not going to fall at our feet, in most cases, and plead with us, "What must I do to be saved?"

- v.10 "Who saved us..." There's the nub of the gospel: it has been from the beginning and is today a message of *salvation*. Salvation matters little or not at all to so many, but it is in fact what every human being needs far more than he or she needs anything else; and, because we know that, salvation is the most wonderful thing we Christians can imagine. And, as always in the Bible, deliverance in Christ is not just deliverance *from* but also deliverance *to*; we were saved to live a holy life. And what makes salvation so important is that is not simply a changed life in this world but *eternal life*, the conquest of death and an endless future in heaven. All of that is what the Bible means by salvation and all of that is what Paul said in those few words.

Verses 9 and 10 are a typical Pauline assertion of salvation by grace alone, salvation born in the eternal counsels of Almighty God and accomplished in history in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul never changed his message: it is the same from his first letter, Galatians, to this his last letter, the second one to Timothy. [Stott, 34] Mysterious as the doctrine of election is, troublesome as it has proved to many Christians, its great lesson should never be missed, for it is obvious enough: God did not choose us because he knew we would deserve it more than others, or would do more with his salvation than others, or even because we would be willing to have it while others would not. Our salvation had nothing to do with some imagined superiority or even eligibility on our part. The reason we are taught that God chose those who would be saved is to leave us unable to claim that we contributed anything to our salvation apart from the sin and guilt from which we had to be saved. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, salvation is a sovereign and loving God's fabulous and personal gift given to deeply undeserving people.

The phrase "brought immortality to light" is significant. Immortality and heaven were taught in the Old Testament but it took Christ and his resurrection to shine a bright light on the reality of the world to come. Before that, one commentator writes, the future was "comparative dusk." [Moule in Stott, 39]

- v.11 Christianity is really the only truly evangelistic faith in the world because only we Christians believe that God *desires* men and women everywhere to repent and be saved.

- v.12 “*That day*” refers to the last judgment, as also in v. 18 and elsewhere in Paul’s letters. [Mounce, 488]
- v.14 The word “deposit” used here and in 1 Timothy 6:20 in a similar context (“guard the deposit”) is also the same word used in v. 12 and translated “what has been entrusted to me.” There it would be simpler to read “he is able to guard my deposit.” Paul is talking about the gospel as a trust he has been given to discharge and now, as Paul approaches his death, Timothy must discharge that same trust. As God has guarded the gospel in Paul’s care, so he will guard the gospel in Timothy’s. In v. 12 Paul says that the fortunes of the gospel don’t finally depend upon him and in v. 14 he says that Timothy is to remember the same thing: the Holy Spirit will help him and secure the safety of the gospel in the world! We may rightly worry about the future fortunes of the gospel in America, but we need never fear for its ultimate safety. The Lord will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Again and again the Voltaires and Thomas Jeffersons of this world have predicted the demise of the Christian faith and again and again they have been proved wrong. Voltaire had scoffed in the 18th century that in a hundred years the Bible would be a forgotten book. In a delicious irony, one of his former homes in Paris now houses the French Bible Society! And today in Africa, there are many more French speaking Christians than there were in France in Voltaire’s day.
- v.15 “Asia” is the Roman province, not the continent; a part of what is now Turkey. Ephesus was in Asia, so was Colossae. The “all” is hyperbole as becomes obvious in the next verse. There were some from Asia who stood with the apostle Paul, including Onesiphorus and his family (whom we learn in v.18 and 4:19 lived in Ephesus). [Mounce, 493] In any case, Paul doesn’t say that all the Christians in Asia had deserted *the gospel*, but that they had deserted *him*, perhaps meaning that they had not **been willing to stick their necks out to support him when he was arrested in Rome**. supported him when he was arrested in Rome. In any case First Timothy had not much improved the situation in Ephesus. Paul was still a controversial figure there.
- v.16 In the ancient world prisoners often depended on family and friends for food and clothing, as well as for emotional support and encouragement. Onesiphorus probably provided all of that. But there was some risk associating with a man who was very likely to be condemned and executed by the Roman authorities as a public enemy. Do you remember how hard it was to find a place to bury the dead Boston terrorist? And have you read that the FBI is interviewing all his known associates? But Onesiphorus was not deterred from helping Paul by the risk of making trouble for himself.
- v.18 It is a Christian spirit that Paul here displays wishing every Christian and especially every faithful Christian to be rewarded for his faithfulness.

Now, there is much to consider in the text we have read this evening. As always virtually any and every sentence in one of Paul's letters can be made into a sermon on an important subject. But I want to consider this evening what I take to be the gist of the paragraph, viz. the Christian thoughts of a dying man. When Paul wrote these words he knew the end was near. As he will famously say in chapter 4 "the time of my departure has come." He may not have then known the precise day or hour, but he knew it would be soon; he could see in his mind's eye the flash of the executioner's sword. [Stott, 39]

We understand that a special authority and importance attaches to the words a man speaks as he is dying. When a man is about to die, we reason, he is more likely to speak the truth and more likely to say the most important things. It is this conviction that lies behind the ancient legal custom to allow dying declarations to be entered into evidence in murder trials even though there is no possibility of cross-examination and even though their admission into evidence would violate the rule against hearsay. I have been at enough deathbeds to know that people do not always speak important and memorable and revealing words on their deathbeds, but we have no difficulty in thinking it wise to hang on every word that Paul chose to say when he was about to die.

And what did he say? Well, the entire letter is his dying declaration, but we get the gist of the entire letter here in the paragraph we read. In these few verses we hear Paul urge his Christian friend to continue to be faithful to gospel work when he is gone. In other words, here is a man who is about to die, who might reasonably be thought to be consumed by his own private interests, and he is all about the gospel and the kingdom of God and the work still needing to be done when he is dead. *That* is the Christian mind in the face of death: still consumed with high purposes, still preoccupied with the fortunes of the kingdom of God, still committed to the salvation of the world and the faithfulness of the church. When Robert Murray McCheyne was on his deathbed, delirious with typhoid fever, he prayed for his congregation, he preached to them, he was even heard handing his church over to the care of a fellow minister. *That* is the true mind of a Christian, filled with high thoughts not just about his or her own salvation, but the salvation of others and of the world, of the glory of Jesus Christ, and the coming judgment of the world. What is one man or woman's death in comparison with all of that? You have that same large view of things in Paul's last words. He was thinking of large things, not small things as his life came to a close. *I hope you all want that to be true, very true of you as well.* More concerned about your children, more concerned about your grandchildren, more concerned about your church, your Christian friends, your unsaved friends, as you lie dying than just about yourself.

But there was a reason why Paul could be so preoccupied with higher things when he himself was about to die. And that is because he had such confidence in the face of death. Look again at

verse 10. Don't let those words seem nothing more than the utterance of some conventional piety. They are explosive in their significance.

“...our Savior Christ Jesus...*abolished death* and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel...”

You may remember the title of the great Puritan John Owen's famous treatise on the cross: *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. Christ *abolished* death! Don't you think that a remarkable statement given the fact that Paul was about to die! What does he mean by saying that Christ abolished death? There is a great deal of death in this world. We were reminded of that this past week when that powerful tornado tore through an Oklahoma City suburb and killed dozens of people, children and adults alike. A terrorist bomb in Iraq killed scores more. But tragedies such as those only remind us of the tragedy that is around us every day. Every day in the United States upwards of 7,000 people die. How then can Christ be said to have abolished death? Paul obviously didn't mean that Christ had eliminated death in *that* sense.

But in the Bible death and life are never simply synonyms for physical existence and non-existence. They are, from the beginning of the Bible to its end, descriptions of *conditions of existence*. Adam and Eve were told that if they partook of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would surely die. And they did die. But they didn't cease to exist, even to live in the ordinary sense of the word. They lived for many years after their sin, they bore children, they grew old. Indeed, they lived a very long time after they died!

The Bible often uses the terms “dead” or “death” to describe the condition of mankind in sin and separated from God. People who are full of life and energy in one sense, are in a more important sense “dead in their transgressions and sins” as Paul says in Ephesians. And when a man or woman, boy or girl becomes a Christian he or she, Paul says, “is made alive.” Each day as we live our lives we are rubbing shoulders with the living and the dead. But, so long as their hearts beat, so long as breath remains in their bodies, the chance remains that the dead might live.

The Bible speaks of death and life in these different ways. Death can refer to physical death, the separation of the soul from the body. In that sense Paul was about to die. But in the Bible death can also refer to spiritual death, the existence of a human being who is separated from God, who stands under the specter of divine judgment. And the Bible can also use the word and the idea of death to refer to what it calls in Revelation “the second death,” the separation of both soul and body from God forever. [Stott, 37] Death in the deepest sense is eternal judgment: eternal existence without life.

Everyone, except those who are alive at the time of the Second Coming must die in the first way. Everyone who is without Christ is already dead in the second way. Those who die in the first

way without Christ, without having obtained his salvation, must die in the third way, the way of the second death. All of this is obvious and lies on the face of the Bible and is taught in hundreds of places and in many ways.

So what does Paul mean when he speaks of Christ having abolished death? He means that Christ has stripped death of its power and has transformed death from an enemy that threatens us into a friend that carries us to God and to heaven. Death is not abolished, is not rendered harmless for everyone, but for those in Christ it has been defeated and defanged. As he famously put it in 1 Cor. 15:55:

“Death is swallowed up in victory. O death where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

That chapter of course is all about the resurrection and our coming resurrection.

If death takes the believer to heaven and to God, it is not our enemy any longer; it is our friend, indeed one of our very best friends. Have you thought about that? The Bible teaches us that our physical death is going to deliver more of what we most longed for in this world than anything else has or could deliver to us. All the Bible reading we have ever done, all the church services we have ever attended, all the prayers we have offered to God, all the hard work of putting on obedience in the fear of Christ that we have done throughout our lives, I say all of that has done much, much less for us than death will do; for when we die we will suddenly and completely be like the Lord Jesus because we will see him as he is. We will suddenly be perfect souls, full of love and only love, cleansed of the last vestiges of sin and selfishness. Joy and peace will control our hearts, we will love everyone with a perfect love and everyone will love us the same way. And our hearts will be deliciously consumed by the glory of God in which we will bask every day all day. It is what a Christian most fondly wishes for, it is what true believers in Jesus strive for all their lives in this world, but it is what no Christian has or keeps *until he or she dies*. And at the moment of death it is ours completely and forever. Now tell me that death is still your enemy and not your friend!

No wonder Jesus should say, standing as we was outside of Lazarus' tomb and about to demonstrate his power over death and his power to lead his people to life on the other side,

“Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” [John 11:26]

I love that last line: “shall never die.” In the sense in which we think of death as something bad, as our enemy, as a threat, in that sense Christians *do not die*. For us death is a completely

different thing. No one would use such a gloomy word as “death” to describe the extraordinarily happy end of a journey to paradise!

Now some will say, and understandably, “Well, it was easy for Paul to say such a thing.” After all, Paul had seen the risen Lord Christ with his own two eyes. He knew that life lay beyond death because he had himself seen someone who had died but who was now brimming with glorified life. What is more, at an early point in his Christian life, fourteen years before he wrote his second letter to the Corinthians (so some twenty five years before he wrote Second Timothy) Paul was granted an extraordinary vision of Paradise and, he said, in that vision he heard things “that cannot be told, which man may not utter.” Indeed, the privilege of seeing what he saw of the other side was so great that Paul had to be given his “thorn in the flesh” -- whatever that was -- to keep him from becoming conceited! Extraordinary! You can read all about that in 2 Corinthians 12. [2 Cor. 12:2-7] It is easy for us to think that, having seen what he saw, no wonder Paul would say that “death was better by far” even than the satisfying life he was living at the time, that “to die was gain,” that to die was “to go home,” and that “to be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord.” All of that Paul wrote about death in his letters. But whether or not it was easier for Paul to say those things than for us to believe them, the fact remains that he *had seen* what he saw and when he spoke about death in these positives ways he was speaking out of his own experience. Wouldn’t you rather hear about death from someone who had actually peered into heaven! Suppose that had happened to you! Wouldn’t you think about death very differently, able now to visualize precisely what lay on the other side?

Wouldn’t you be eager to get there for real?

Now, let’s turn the attention to ourselves. I have something to tell you. In our modern society it almost seems that I am failing to keep a secret, that I am spilling the beans, but, no matter, here goes: *You are going to die.* Every one of you; without exception. Whether by accident, criminal act, or disease; whether suddenly or at the end of a long illness, *you are going to die.* Your heart is going to stop beating, the brain waves will cease, the life will depart from your body. *You,* mention your name to yourself, *that person* will die. It can’t be helped. It is something you can be sure of, a future event you can count on. You may or may not know that you are on the point of death as Paul knew it when he wrote his last letter to Timothy. You may or may not be as clear-headed before you die as Paul was. But you are going to die just as he did. We all, in the haunting words of Alan Seeger’s poem from World War I “have a rendezvous with death.”

To be sure, the Lord Christ might return to earth before you die. I read the other day that the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reports that roughly half (48%) of Christians in the United States today say they believe Christ will either definitely (27%) or probably (20%) return to earth in the next 40 years. [*First Things* (June/July 2013) 69] Of course, forty years ago there would have been a sizeable number who would have said the same thing, and forty years before that. Frankly, I wouldn’t bet on it. Our outlook is so provincial. We seem to think that the world *as it*

appears to American Christians is the world as it really is. I suspect there are many fewer Christians in Africa or China who think that the world will end in the next forty years! I don't really take that very seriously anyway. If they really thought Jesus were coming so soon, they would be living differently. As one wise man put it, "Jesus is coming. Look busy."

But more to the point, many of those same Christians will be dead in forty years. *That* is certain! So the question of whether the Lord will return is more interesting than important. Our earthly lives will be over one way or the other. The real question is not how my life in this world will end, but what difference it makes to me that it is going to end so soon, whatever way it ends! *But we do not live in a society that faces this fact.* We live in a time and place in which death is hidden away from view and in which it is rarely openly discussed. We are finding out in our time what happens when the fear of death becomes a social principle, when an entire society begins to live under the conviction -- whether or not it is strongly held or even denied on a personal or individual basis -- that there is nothing but a short life, the sorrow of death, and then nothing. We are finding out what happens when an entire society operates with the conviction that death ends everything. They thought such a principle would be liberating -- the end of any fear of judgment in the world to come -- but we are discovering that it does nothing of the kind. Such a view of life and death drains life of real meaning, robs people of any reason to think precious the following generations of human life, destroys the connection between the generations, dulls true creativity and replaces it with titillation, and saps the world of love. [cf. P.T. Forsyth, *This Life and the Next*, 10-11]

Think about this. We live in a world mad with entertainment. Why? Because it is how we keep at bay thoughts of the one implacable and inevitable tragedy of life, death itself. Pascal saw that as far back as the 17th century. Man's obsession with entertainment was a product of his fear of death. Even funerals now serve to distract from death, strange as it may seem. I read this recently from Carl Trueman of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He is speaking about how the church has willingly accommodated this effort to distract people from the reality of death and how the tragic aspect of life has disappeared from Christian worship. The reality of sin and mankind's desperate need for forgiveness, the punishing sorrows of human life, the looming specter of judgment, the hard-edged and unavoidable specter of death are as absent in many churches nowadays as they are absent from American television. Here's Trueman on funerals:

"Even funerals, the one religious context where one might have assumed the reality of death would be unavoidable, have become the context for that most ghastly and incoherent of acts: the celebration of a life now ended. [I hope you gather his meaning. A person is either in heaven, in which case what he was in the past is of relative unimportance, or he is in hell, in which case what he was in the past is of absolute but terrifying importance.] The Twenty-Third Psalm and 'Abide with Me' were funeral

staples for many years but not so much today. References to the valley of the shadow of death and the ebbing out of life's little day, reminders both of our mortality and of God's faithfulness even in the darkest of times, have been replaced as funeral favorites by 'Wind Beneath My Wings' and '[I did it] My Way.' The trickledown economics of worship as entertainment has [sic] reached even the last rites for the departed." ["Tragic Worship," *First Things* (June/July 2013) 20]

First the graveyards disappeared from the church yards and worshippers no longer passed by the dead on their way to worship. Now, in the age of cremation, graveyards are disappearing altogether and the public witness to death with them.

We have no particular difficulty understanding why *un*believers avoid as much as possible the contemplation of death. They live, as we read in Hebrews 2:15, in lifelong slavery to the fear of death. No wonder they are suppressing the truth and keeping it out of mind as much as possible. But perhaps one reason why the unbelieving world around us has so easily lost touch with the reality of death and why it feels so free to ignore the one inescapable reality of human life is because Christians don't seem to have much enthusiasm for it themselves! We have too much imbibed our culture's reticence about death. There is among us not enough overt enthusiasm about death as entrance into paradise.

We are not talking about a morbid interest in death. Many Christians confuse dying with death, but they are two very different thing. No wants to die in the sense of the experience of disease, of wasting away, of pain, and of the heartbreak of separation from those one loves. Nothing in the Bible suggests that we are to rejoice in dying. The experience of dying is usually awful and no sane person looks forward to it. But death itself is another matter entirely. No sane person regrets finally reaching the door on the other side of which stands paradise. No child who has read the Narnia books would regret finding that wardrobe!

There needs to be much more of this confidence, even eager anticipation of death among Christians, much more in your life and in mine: both the sturdy acceptance of death's inevitability and almost a relish in the prospect, knowing as we do what unimaginable pleasure lies beyond. The world needs us to have Paul's outspoken confidence in the fact that Christ has abolished death for those who trust in him and has transformed it into one short dark passage to eternal light. Like Paul we ought to look forward to making the very most of our lives in this world and to living as long as we can profitably serve the Lord and others. We have only one life to live by faith. We should make the most of it and be seen to be making the most of it.

But we should also not hesitate to demonstrate that far from fearing death, we are actually looking forward to it, that we desire to depart and be with Christ which is better by far. If you really believe that, how can you not anticipate your death? If paradise awaits, if death takes you

home, if to die is to be with Christ how can we not desire it? The world needs to see this utter unconcern in the face of death, even more this relish for what it will bring. If Christians don't demonstrate that, how will the world ever take us seriously when we say that heaven, eternal life, the world of joy, endless and boundless joy await those who trust in Jesus Christ?

But nowadays hardly anyone ever hears this confidence, this glowing anticipation in public speech. We don't talk about death. So what are people to think? Is death, as Winston Churchill thought, simply "going out like a candle". Or is it, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it, "the supreme festival on the road to freedom." [Mataxas, 486] Is death something to be feared, or are we free to say with aplomb and a smile, as John Newton did at the end of his long, happy, and fruitful life, "I am packed and sealed and waiting for the post." [Aitken, 347] Fact is, if the issue is not forced upon them, most people will think about death as little as they possibly can. But if you don't think about death, you can't understand life, not correctly and you won't concern yourself about salvation, yours or the salvation of others. And you won't rejoice as Christians ought to rejoice in the great salvation that is ours in Christ.

There is still, of course, a massive amount of sentimentality about death in our culture. When people die those left behind instinctively talk about how the person is in a better place, how he or she is happier now, or how they are looking down on their loved ones, rejoicing in their successes or achievements, and so on. The pitcher for the baseball team who does something good points up to his dad who is looking down and admiring his son's work. Baloney; if they really thought that, it would profoundly alter their lives. What is worse, such sentimentality is utterly divorced from moral reality. After all of Alexander Dumas' mistresses and illegitimate children, lavish and improvident spending, after his bankruptcy, his flight to Belgium to escape his creditors, he could still say, "I shall tell death a story and she will be kind to me." No, the world needs to see a view of death that is honest and realistic but also profoundly hopeful and positive and nobody else in the world, *nobody* else in the world, except real Christians can supply that for the world. But will we?

What are we Christians to do? Well we are to think about death. We are to imagine it in our own case. I admit that this has become easier and easier for me now that I have loved ones in heaven. I think of their life now and wonder what it is like and it makes it much easier for me to think about my own death. Little as I will want to go through the process of dying, I know now that I will be able, I think in that hour, really to relish the prospect of what lies just on the other side; to be rid of all that weighs me down in this world, and find myself absolutely overcome with delicious joy.

Samuel Rutherford urged believers to "fore-fancy your death." Nicolas Ridley advised, "let death be premeditated." Thomas Goodwin wrote, "Die speculatively." In *Pilgrim's Progress* Part II, Interpreter says to Christiana,

"If a man would live well, let him fetch his last day to him, and make it always his company keeper."

And then C.S. Lewis: "Die before you die. There is no chance after." And when you think about your death and what will happen, cast your thought back to Enoch and Elijah, to Lazarus, to Jesus on the cross promising the thief that he would be in paradise that very day, to Jesus himself alive on the third day; think of Stephen seeing the glory of God and the Lord Jesus in the sky as the stones beat the life out of him. Then think of Paul on the Damascus Road and later when he had his overwhelming vision of paradise. Think of John telling us that we shall be like Jesus because we shall see him as he is. Think of the assembled church in heaven as we are given to see it in the book of Revelation.

And then say, again with John Newton, "I am still in the land of the dying; I shall be in the land of the living soon." Think about all of this; think, think, think. "As a man thinks, so he is." Imagine. Consider what it will be like. Hark back to all the evidence God has given us and all the proof he has provided us. Mark your days as each one falls behind you. One less to go before you walk through the door to paradise! Talk with one another, encourage one another with these words: "We will soon be there! Denique Coelum, heaven at last." Lord; what a morning! Until finally, they will be able to say of you:

And death itself, to her, was but
The wider opening of the door
That had been opening, more and more,
Through all her life, and ne'er was shut.

And never shall be shut. She left
The door ajar for you and me,
And, looking after her, we see
The glory shining through the cleft.

John Oxenham, 1900