

2 Timothy 8**2 Timothy 4:1-8****August 11, 2013****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

I tell you often enough that the best way to read the Word of God is to accept the force of its teaching and truth in any passage without necessarily seeking to reconcile that particular emphasis with other emphases that we find in the Word of God. It is characteristic of the biblical pedagogy to teach its truth in accordance with its polarities and we have that here this Lord's Day evening. A very different message this evening from the one this morning from Luke 22.

We are coming to the end of the letter and the paragraph we have before us this evening is the final paragraph of the body of the letter, followed only by personalia, that is, personal confidences, specific instructions to Timothy, and greetings. We may, therefore, regard the first eight verses of chapter 4 as both a summary of the letter and its conclusion. Think of everything after as what we would call a P.S. So we have here some of the last words written by the Apostle Paul, at least the last words that have survived. After all of that consequential life, after those letters that were to change the world, we have this final paragraph that reads as if it were the great man's last will and testament. [Mounce, 577]

Text Comment

- v.1 Paul makes his charge the more solemn by reminding Timothy of the judgment day, of the accounting that must be given to God for the lives we have lived. There have been many who have argued and there are many who argue today that Christians will not have to face the judgment of their lives because Christ was judged in their stead. But it is very clear in the Bible that everyone will be judged, even if it is only to fix one's place within the company of those saved by the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. "Living and the dead" is an emphatic way of saying "everyone." [Mounce, 572] Among a great many texts that speak of all men coming to the judgment think of James' warning that few Christians should be teachers for theirs is the greater judgment or of the promise of Rev. 20 that the dead -- all the dead -- will be judged according to what they did as it is written in the books. The Bible is explicit about the greater or lesser rewards of the saints, even of some having their works burned up and their being saved, though as through fire. So the appeal to the judgment day as a Christian motive for obedience, sacrifice, and service is found throughout the New Testament, actually in a surprisingly large number of texts.

One thing the apostles never doubted was that Christ would come again!

- v.2 We said last time that “the word” would include not only the 39 books that make up our OT but the gospel proclamation of the New Testament, whether or not it had yet been written down. We don’t know at this point whether Timothy might have seen an early copy of the Gospel of Mark or even whether or not he had a set of scrolls that were copies of the letters, or at least some of the letters, that the Apostle Paul had written. We know that Timothy was present when Paul some of those letters. It seems likely that he had a copy of his own and surely that, too, would be included in the command “preach the Word.”

In any case, he is to preach the word no matter whether it is convenient to do so. “Patience” is the mark of a man who knows that his responsibility is delivering the message, not assuring its results. “Teaching” suggests here that the preaching should be intelligent, clear, and persuasive.

- v.3 “The time is coming,” given the sense of “last days” in 3:1, does not refer to some distant day, but is a rhetorical flourish, a way of referring to what is already true. If there is anything characteristic about human beings, if there is anything characteristic about our political life as a democracy, it is this penchant for human beings to believe *what they want to be true*. No clever teacher ever went broke telling folk in an interesting and entertaining way what they want to hear!
- v.5 Once again those two little words we’ve heard again and again throughout 1 and 2 Timothy, “But you...” Timothy is not to be put off by the indifference or hostility of others; he is not to be discouraged by a lack of visible success. He has a calling from God and he is to fulfill it.
- v.6 Paul now turns to his own circumstances *as a further spur to Timothy’s faithfulness*. His argument is effectively: “you must be unalterably committed to gospel work because my work is done. You must continue because I’ll be gone. You are going to succeed me as Joshua succeeded Moses and as Elisha succeeded Elijah. I have done my part, now you must do yours.” [Mounce, 579; Stott, 113]

Paul obviously regards his fate as fixed. He knows he will be condemned and executed, though the process, as we will read in vv. 9 and 21, may take sufficient time for Timothy to reach Rome before Paul’s death. One of the odd features of tyranny, and in some respects one of the interesting proofs of the universal human conscience, is that even cruel tyrannies function according to a strange sort of legalism in which they can’t murder innocent people until they have punctiliously followed the process through from beginning to end. So it was in Rome, so it is in many parts of the world today.

v.8 Nero may have him executed as a criminal, but he will be rewarded in heaven as a faithful servant and soldier. This is not boasting on Paul's part. It is encouragement for Timothy. Paul suffered, worked himself to exhaustion, but he has been faithful, not perfect but faithful; he has finished his work, and is now going home. He wants Timothy to be able to say the same thing when *his* time comes.

In our text Paul is solemnly appealing to his young friend Timothy, still with perhaps many years of his Christian ministry remaining, to make the sacrifices a faithful service requires and to undertake his calling with determination. To encourage Timothy to heroic effort Paul turns, in v. 6, to himself and to his own example. At the very end of his life the great Apostle to the Gentiles looks back upon his career as a Christian and a Christian minister, upon what *he* has done as a servant and soldier of the Lord Jesus Christ. And what a life and what a service it was!

He who can part from country and from kin,
 And scorn delights, and tread the thorny way,
 A heavenly crown, through toil and pain, to win –
 He who reviled can tender love repay,
 And buffeted, for bitter foes can pray –
 He who, upspringing at his Captain's call,
 Fights the good fight, and when at last the day
 Of fiery trial comes, can nobly fall –
 Such were a saint – or more – and such the holy Paul!
 [Anon. cited in Schaff, *Church History*, i, 316]

It was Paul who, more than anyone else, established the church in the Gentile world; it was Paul who provided a substantial part of what would become the New Testament; it was Paul who established, again more than anyone else, the pattern of the Christian ministry and the Christian calling of the missionary. Paul is an example to emulate. Paul sees Timothy's imitation of Paul's ministry -- in its faithfulness to the gospel, in its indefatigable effort, in its willingness to suffer -- as his personal legacy. And so he urges Timothy to give himself without reservation to the work so that he will be able to speak of his life as Paul could speak of his own now that it was over. That is Paul's simple argument in vv. 1-8 of chapter 4. As he said in v. 1, Timothy should serve the Lord with the specter of the judgment day always before him. And now, for Timothy's sake, and for the sake of every servant of Christ, Paul pictures himself soon to face that judgment and shows Timothy what a privilege and a glory it is to face that judgment with confidence, knowing that the work to which he had been called has been faithfully performed.

Familiar as we are with Paul's noble words, accustomed as we are to take it for granted that no one had a better right to speak them or write them than did the great apostle, we may fail to notice something very characteristic in the way in which he speaks of faithful Christian service

and its ultimate issue. Clearly, as v. 8 indicates, Paul considers neither his own life nor its reward as peculiar to himself. “And not only to me,” he says, “but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

What Paul is describing in his own case is a faithful, fruitful life of service, a life of accomplishment. The context of his remarks is a Christian’s public service, not a Christian’s private life, but no doubt by analogy it would apply as well to that. It is in *that* context, it is with regard to his calling, *his work*, that he has fought, finished, and kept. Here is the nub of the point I am going to make. We should not think, it would be a mistake to think that Paul would have expected such words to be used of, say, the Christian workers he describes in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, whose Christian service was so poorly rendered, whose contributions to the kingdom of God were so inept, whose keeping of their charge so ill-considered and so half-hearted that their work will be destroyed by fire on the Great Day, though they themselves will be saved, but only as those who escape through the flames. Paul did not think that every real Christian was going to hear the words, “Well done thou good and faithful servant.” There are Christians who are *not* going to hear those words. Does that bother you?

But that fact is confirmed by Paul’s saying that the *crown* of righteousness he will receive will be “*awarded*” to him on that day. The word Paul employs here, the lexicographers and commentators inform us, “suggests the idea of requital or reward.” Something *for* something. [Bernard, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 144; Büchsel, *TDNT*, ii, 167-168] It is used this way often enough in the New Testament, as, for example, in Romans 2:6: “God will *give* [that is requite] to each person according to what he has done.”

This sense of the word as Paul uses it here is confirmed by the phrase with which the statement begins: “Now there is in store for me...” You won’t recognize that, I wouldn’t recognize that as a particularly familiar pattern of speech in the first century, but it was. “It is an expression which [had in that time] almost become technical in edicts of commendation, in which recognition [for services rendered] was bestowed on someone by oriental kings.” [Dibelius/Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 121] In other words, Paul here is not saying that he will have the reward of the righteousness of Christ, of the forgiveness of his sins, of entrance into eternal life when he stands before the Lord Christ on the Great Day. He will have that to be sure, as he says often enough in his letters. *But here he is speaking of something else.* He is speaking of the reward that will be his for the faithfulness with which he has served the Lord. And he speaks of other Christians in the same way. Such reward is reserved for those “who have *longed* [a strong word] for Christ’s appearing.” Every Christian, alas, can’t be described as someone who *longed* for the Second Coming. To describe someone as longing for the coming of the Lord is a beautiful way to describe a faithful, earnest, and consequential Christian life. It is the life of a Christian who lived in the active prospect of the appearing of Jesus Christ and the Judgment Day to follow. No wonder that he should say such things in commending to Timothy, his young assistant, a dutiful,

hard-working, sacrificial, noble life of Christian service. “I charge you in the presence of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead.”

We connect here, in a very personal and important way, with Paul’s teaching in many places in his letters and supremely in 2 Corinthians 5:10, where the champion of free grace and justification by faith alone nevertheless asserts unapologetically that *how* he lives his Christian life and *the faithfulness and zeal with which he serves the Lord* will be taken into account in the Lord’s judgment of his life.

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,
So that each one may receive what *is due* for what he *has done* in the body, whether good
or evil.”

That thought prompts Paul to go on immediately to remark that the prospect of that judgment, that evaluation, that reward or diminishment, serves as an inspiration, a goad to him in his serving Christ:

“Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.”

Well that is what Paul is urging Timothy to do and to do faithfully until the end of his life: “persuade others.” And he’s urging him to do so for the same reason. The judgment awaits! So clearly is this Paul’s meaning here in 2 Tim. 4, so unmistakably is he speaking of a greater reward that more faithful Christians will receive for their greater faithfulness and the quality of their service to Christ, that some scholars of the more critical persuasion have denied Paul’s authorship of these famous words. This is one of the texts that they offer as proof that Paul did not write the Pastoral Epistles. Paul, they say, would never have said this. As one commentator puts it, this can’t be Paul writing *precisely because Paul speaks “only of his success and not also of his weakness”* and because he draws attention only to “*his actions and not much rather God’s action.*” [Dibelius/Conzelmann, 121]

But of course it is Paul who writes these words, the very Paul who throughout his letters emphasizes as no one else ever has that justification -- our forgiveness and our acceptance with God -- is by grace alone and by Christ alone. But it is the same Paul who over and again commends to every believer a life of heroic service in the kingdom of Jesus Christ with the prospect that such a life shall have its reward. Paul never thought that free grace, he never thought that a Christian’s continuing sinfulness, of which he was also brutally frank, meant that a man or woman could not serve the Lord faithfully and fruitfully or that there was not a real and very important difference between Christians who served the Lord conspicuously well and those who did not. Paul was the very last man to think that justification by the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ meant that Christ did not care about how his followers lived their lives and would

not take care to make proper distinctions between them according to their faithfulness, their zeal, and their fruitfulness. Paul is urging Timothy not to be among those who are saved though as through fire, but to be among those whose faithful and fruitful service the Lord Christ will requite with a crown on the Great Day!

And so Paul does not say here that Christ has fought, but that *Paul himself* has fought; not that Christ has kept the faith but that *he* has; not that Christ has finished the course, but that *Paul* has finished it. It would eviscerate Paul's statement to turn it into a confession of imputed righteousness and it would undermine the exhortation that Paul is making to a young man embarking on a life of Christian leadership to take him to mean that the only thing that counts in the last judgment is Christ's righteousness imputed to you by faith. That clearly is not what Paul is saying. He's urging Timothy on to greater things and he is using his own circumstances as an argument. *Paul is not talking to Timothy about what Christ has done for him, not here, but about what he must do for Christ!* Let no one take our crown in the proclamation of salvation by grace alone and justification by faith alone. Let it be true of us as Robert Murray McCheyne said it was true of one of his ministerial friends, a Glasgow pastor named, John Muir: "Muir is imputed righteousness to the backbone!" But let us, at the same time, be Christian faithfulness, Christian devotion, Christian sacrifice, Christian heroism to the backbone; the kind of noble service of the kingdom of God that alas is not always to be found in even the real Christian life. This is Paul's appeal to Timothy and, in him, to everyone who aspires to a life of serving Jesus Christ.

How ready the Bible is to summon us to such a life. How like our heavenly Father and our great Captain to care how we live and how we fight. How often the Word of God appeals to our sense of honor and our desire to do great things for the one who did indescribably great things for us. What else could be meant, for example, by the astonishing summons -- one would think the utterly impossible summons -- to walk *worthy* of the calling we have received, to live in a manner *worthy* of the gospel of Christ (Phil. 1:27), to live *worthy* of the Lord and to please him in every way (Col. 1:10), to live lives *worthy* of God (1 Thess. 2:12), *worthy* of the kingdom of God (2 Thess. 1:5), or to act in a way *worthy* of the saints (Rom. 16:2). Are you living *worthy* of those things? And why else should the Lord Jesus, in teaching his disciples, lay such stress on the heroic element -- courage, sacrifice, high purpose -- in authentic Christian discipleship? C.T. Studd the pioneering missionary was only being faithful to this emphasis found everywhere in the pages of the Bible and especially in the teaching of Jesus and Paul when he condensed the spirit and the principle of Christian living into one memorable aphorism:

"If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him."

It is certainly a brute fact of the Christian life that we all know that we should live more or less worthy of the gospel each day and that we could live much more worthy of the gospel than we do and that others have surpassed us in Christian devotion, hard work, and fruitfulness.

How honestly the Bible admits this: that not all Christians serve Christ and the gospel as sacrificially as others, not every believer is as devoted to the cause, as careless of his or her own comfort and welfare, as are other believers. And so there is this appeal, this urging upon us of higher, better things. And so, accordingly, there is this promise of reward, of the Savior's notice, of his requital of all his servants' hard work and of all his soldiers' courage. How characteristic of the Bible to urge upon all of us who believe in Jesus Christ a life of great accomplishment, of noble deeds, and of self-sacrificing service. Christ is our Savior. He is also our example. He left us an example that we should follow in his steps. And what example did he set for us but that of a life of devotion to his Father's will, of great sacrifice willingly made on behalf of the gospel, of heroic effort to secure the interests of God in the hearts of men, of a short life of intense labor ended in exhaustion and all for the sake of others. Are we not embarrassed to compare our lives to Paul's? Perhaps not; perhaps we think of him as living on another plane. But are we not embarrassed to compare our lives even to the lives of other Christians that we know? And is that embarrassment not a true intuition?

Even before the incarnation of the Son of God, it was the inexorable logic of redeeming grace that those who were given to know God, to have their sins forgiven, that those who received the promise of eternal life in defiance of their ill-desert, should live in a way that adorned redeeming love and demonstrated the immeasurable greatness of God's gifts to his people. The wise man who teaches us the way of life in Proverbs laid it down as a rule:

The wicked man flees though no one pursues,
but the righteous are as bold as a lion. [Prov. 28:1]

In the terrible times of persecution in the middle of the 2nd century B.C., the righteous, Daniel said long before the event, "would show strength and act." [11:32] I like the KJV better: "the people who know their God will be strong and do exploits." And so they did. We read in 1 Maccabees that "They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant" and many of them did die for their loyalty to Yahweh. And the heroic resistance of those inter-testamental believers, the sacrifices they made and the hardship they endured in God's name to restore the true worship of his temple won for them a place in the hall of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. Some believers before at that time and in the centuries after Pentecost quailed in the face of persecution and had to ask for forgiveness later for having betrayed the Lord in the pinch. Such is God's grace that such forgiveness was freely given. But they are not celebrated in Hebrews 11!

How could it be otherwise than that people who know the living God, who know *him* and love *him* should live their lives high above the ground and should aspire to accomplish great things in the name and for the sake of their God. Why, the Bible from beginning to end is a record of great men and women whose exploits in the service of the King of Kings ennoble the name of Christian and inspire the hearts of all those who think that the love of Christ deserves great things in return. The Word of God is in a great many of its pages the Holy Spirit's own commendation of those who have served him nobly and at great cost.

Now it must be admitted that Paul's appeal, frank, honest, searching, solemn and deeply theological as it is, is one that can strike modern hearts as strange, even off-putting. I guarantee you there is a significant number of ministers in the Presbyterian Church in America, if they were preaching this text here, would not give you this sermon. They would take Paul's confession as a confession of his salvation in Jesus Christ, not of his exemplary service in Christ's name. The promise of reward for accomplishment can strike Christians as threatening to *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, the thought of serving with some thought of reward may seem to them selfish and vain, and the implication of distinction based on accomplishment can strike anyone who is infected with the spirit of modern American egalitarianism as elitist.

Some of this reticence we have inherited from our modern culture, perhaps most of it in fact. In certain ways the whole notion of heroic accomplishment has fallen on hard times. In a culture that has made the principle of victimization fundamental to its public theology, the heroic ideal can scarcely fail to smack of heresy. The one who rises above the rest by reason of the commitment of all his powers to certain achievements mocks the multitude who see themselves as the helpless victims of circumstance. The change at first was subtle but now this viewpoint is a staple of our public discourse. I remember first being struck by the change at the time of the Iran hostage crisis during the Carter presidency. [I'm sure many of you younger people remember that very well. That was back in 1960s!] Those four hundred or so hostages in Tehran we began regularly to refer to as heroes. So far as anyone knew there was nothing particularly heroic about their conduct. They were in fact victims. They had not fought to prevent their capture and been overwhelmed in battle. They had not died rather than be taken. They had not endured torture rather than reveal our nation's secrets. No one, in fact, thought they behaved badly, but there was nothing particularly heroic about their conduct either. They had, simply put, been at the wrong place at the wrong time. But that was enough to make them heroes in the new way of thinking. The new hero is simply the very public victim. Nowadays it has gone further still: to be a hero one has only to fall into a well and have it take several days to get you out. To be sure, we know better. We couldn't help but recognize that there was a great difference, on 9-11, between those who were the victims of the attack and those who entered those burning, shaking buildings to rescue the injured, many of whom died in making the attempt. We still know what a hero is, even if the concept offends us at some level. We have been taught that self-

regard is natural and proper; but heroism virtually always is motivated by regard for another, whether God or man.

In a day when we are no longer sure that men should remain on the *Titanic* so that there will be adequate room for the women and children in the lifeboats, the one who is willing and determined to make the sacrifice of many things, even one's life, for higher causes must seem a reproach to the rest who have been taught that it is not only permissible but even right to see first to one's own interests.

In my Latin class at Covenant High School, I have the seniors read the first twenty chapters or so of Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. You may remember from your school days that at the beginning of his masterpiece, Caesar explains that the Belgae were the bravest of the three peoples that populated Gaul because they were furthest removed from the highly developed civilization of the Roman province and so were least often visited by merchants with enervating luxuries for sale, and nearest to the Germans who lived across the Rhine, with whom they were continually at war. How unlike the brave Belgae we are as a people nowadays. Caesar has provided an almost perfect description of our effete culture: enervating luxuries in abundance, a people that prize their comfort and pleasure more than almost anything else, and very little of that warfare that nerves and steels the spirit. Such has been America for many years and such has been the effect of this culture upon its people, Christians among them. Such has been its effect on me!

And what does that mean but that we of all people, we American Christians, we Christians of the West, must pay special attention to the Bible's summons to lives of daring, difficulty, and sacrifice for the sake of the gospel and kingdom of Jesus Christ. We, of all people, must not soften the Apostle's athletic and martial imagery: *fight, run, remain faithful in the face of adversity and opposition*. The adversary of the kingdom is not slothful. His hostility to Christ and all his followers is unchanged. If the borders of that kingdom are to be advanced, men and women will have to be strong and do exploits; they will have to be bold as lions.

Now remember why the Apostle made these remarks. He knew that Timothy would be inspired by them, emboldened by them. Are you? Do you read this and find your shoulders sagging or are they being squared and do you find it in your heart to say, I want, and so I commit myself, to be able to say at the end of my life what Paul said at the end of his, in my own way and according to my own gifts and opportunities; I want to be able to say I have fought the fight, I have run the race, I have kept the faith? Will you apply yourself to the work come wind, come weather as Paul urged Timothy to apply himself in this famous text? Will you give yourself to your calling, whatever calling it is, without regard to your comfort, to your reputation, your salary, even to your safety?

No one can read the Bible and think the Christian life is some pedestrian affair, either a walk in the park or a preoccupation with matters of minor importance. We are dealing with life and death every day, with the glory of God, and the eternal welfare of human beings. Of course it will be difficult -- this is the devil's world -- of course it will be exhausting. We not only accept that, we welcome the challenge because Christ has called us, to an important, valuable life, and promises to help those who intend to do so in reliance upon him.

Julius Caesar was no paragon of virtue. But he lived a large life in part because he saw himself as occupying a great role on the world stage. So do you, brothers and sisters; greater than his, indeed. When he and his soldiers went into battle, he would call out *Felicitas! Happiness! Good Fortune!* To do battle for the cause of Rome, in Caesar's case to do battle for the cause of Caesar, was true happiness. To do exploits, great deeds that will be remembered, remarked upon. *Felicitas!* Well, we're in battle every day. *His* battle cry was *Felicitas!* "Who for the joy before him endured the cross!" It was in battle that *his* life was fulfilled. And so for us: to do battle for Christ's cause is happiness! It is our good fortune!"

And before us is our King, holding in his hand the crown of righteousness! No sacrifice you make, no weariness you endure for the sake of concerted action as a follower of Jesus, no opposition you face, no loss you suffer in serving Christ's cause, no adornment of the gospel in your life -- whether the willing forgiveness of the sins of others, whether the faithful and humble enduring of a trial, whether a life committed to the welfare of others, whether a faithful gospel witness to the unsaved -- will go unrewarded. Christ is coming again and when he comes nothing is going to matter to you except how you lived for him in this world. Nothing.

Francis Ridley Havergal, the 19th century English hymn-writer who wrote "Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee," once said that "She wished to crowd into her life all she could possibly do for Jesus." *That's* the spirit! We know very well we should think that way every day, from the time we get up in the morning until the time we fall asleep at night. We don't, but we should. And no one with Christian blood in his or her veins doesn't want much more of that spirit. As the old saying has it, "He is not good who does not wish to be better." That is Paul tonight to Timothy and to us: do all you can for Jesus, more, much more than so far you have; fight the fight, run the race, keep the faith. You'll be so glad you did, and so grateful to be able to give that legacy to your children!

Felicitas!