

At the End of Paul's Life

TEXT: "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me" (2 Timothy 4:6-9; KJV).

INTRODUCTION

The book of Acts closes with Paul being a prisoner at Rome, soon to be tried in Nero's court: "And he abode two whole years in his own hired dwelling, and received all that went in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, none forbidding him" (Acts 28:30, 31). The Scriptures do not give the details of Paul's life beyond this time.

According to secular writers, about three years after Paul's arrival at Rome, on July 18, A.D. 64, the burning of the city occurred. Beginning in the poorer section of the city, the fire roared, crackled, and sizzled for nine days. Of the fourteen districts into which the city was divided, ten were scorched and virtually destroyed. Everywhere palaces, temples, and altars were in ashes. Even the Circus Maximus, large enough to seat 200,000 people, was destroyed.

Most historians do not blame Nero for the incineration of the city, but he certainly did not fiddle while Rome burned because the violin had not been invented! The cause of the fire was likely accidental, since it had not rained for weeks and the old buildings stood like match sticks ready to ignite. The angry populace, however, began to blame Nero, who was known to have ambitious plans for rebuilding the capital. Tacitus (A.D. 55-120), the Roman historian, wrote these words concerning Nero's reaction:

To get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular (Annals 15:44).

Tacitus described the horrible torture inflicted on Christians by Nero. They were covered with the skins of wild beasts and torn apart by dogs. They were beheaded, nailed to crosses, burned as torches, cast to lions, and thrown from a high obelisk (which stands yet at the front of St. Peter's Cathedral).

The oldest tradition insists that Paul was released from the imprisonment of Acts 28 and traveled to Spain. He was re-arrested during Nero's persecution, tried and beheaded near what is now the road to the International Airport.

Awaiting death in the city of Rome, Paul penned the most beautiful epitaph imaginable in 2 Timothy 4:6-9 (KJV).

I. "I AM NOW READY TO BE OFFERED"

Paul viewed his death and life as an offering to God. He was departing, changing his state and place of existence.

Life is a long series of departures from people and places. This departure for Paul was to be the last and best, for he was departing to be with Christ.

II. "I HAVE FOUGHT A GOOD FIGHT"

He had faced head-on the powers of darkness, never retreating or leaving the battlefield. He bore in his body scars of all sizes and depths.

Could our Christian lives be summed up as a fight? Or would it be described as a pastime, a sideline, a game?

III. "I HAVE FINISHED MY COURSE"

"I have finished my *course*." What a course! He had been hunted, hated, despised, distrusted, badgered, beaten, laughed at, lied about, treated as "the filth of the earth, the offscouring of all things."

"I have finished my course." Beginning a race is essential, but crossing the finish line makes possible the reward (Revelation 2:10; Hebrews 12:1, 2).

"I have finished *my* course." It was not the course of Peter, John, or Aquilla! His course was divinely planned, purposed, and projected. He was "a chosen vessel."

Each of us has his own course to finish (2 Corinthians 5:10). Paul could not have finished his course had he not begun it through proper gospel obedience (Acts 22:16).

IV. "I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH"

"The faith" is referred to in Jude 3 and Ephesians 4:5. It was "once delivered" for all ages and people. It was to be transmitted by faithful men from one generation to the next (2 Timothy 2:2).

Paul "kept" the faith. It was in his heart, on his lips, and before his eyes. He had it in death because he kept it in life.

When Mark Twain married Olivia Langdon, she had a deep religious faith. But Twain (Samuel Clemens) scoffed at her faith and made light of it, until it diminished and died in her heart. In

time, Twain saw that he had broken her spirit and saddened her soul. Thus he suggested, "Livy, if it comforts you to lean on your faith, do so." She replied sadly, "I can't. I don't have any faith left." Those words would haunt the famed author until the day he died.

V. "THERE IS LAID UP FOR ME A CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS"

This is the crown which was for the head of a righteous man, awarded by a righteous judge. The crown would be presented "at that day," the day of Christ's appearing. There is, of course, a sense in which the dead are at rest with Christ in Paradise. When Jesus comes, our immortal bodies will be joined with our spirits and the final reward will be given. Paul will receive his crown on Judgment Day. We will be there to witness it. All who love Christ's appearing will receive crowns on that same great day.

CONCLUSION

He had reason to believe that the time of his departure was very near. People often die unexpectedly. One-third of all American men die of accidents or illnesses which strike within twenty-four hours of death. There may be no time left for repentance or baptism. The only wise course, therefore, is to live each day as though it were our last. When we are ready to die, we are ready to live.

—Paul Rogers

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