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## Last Thoughts from Death Row

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TEXT: 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18 (ESV)

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and 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.

At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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Back in 2007, computer science professor Randy Pausch delivered a lecture at Carnegie Mellon University. He called the lecture *Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams*. But what made this lecture so significant was not so much the topic, but the stage of life Randy was in when he gave it. He had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and told he only had a few months to live. So, the speech became known as the "Last Lecture." What he said and how he said it inspired a lot of people when he talked. He was funny and smart. He talked about his field, science and engineering, but he also gave advice, life lessons, and even did a few pushups on stage. The room was packed, and he received a standing ovation. That lecture has been viewed more than 20 million times on YouTube. It eventually became published as a book entitled *The Last Lecture*. Randy went on Oprah and Diane Sawyer, and there's a memorial scholarship in his name. Something about what he said and when he said it struck a chord with lots of people.

Now, in the book of 2 Timothy, we have the Apostle Paul giving his last lecture to his young partner in the Gospel, Timothy. In this letter we have Paul passing on advice and teaching life lessons, and especially instructing Timothy on the importance of guarding and sticking with preaching the good news of God graciously, reconciling the world to himself through his Son, Jesus Christ. Paul will be dead soon. He's in a Roman prison awaiting execution. His ministry for Jesus, which had always met with opposition in trouble, had landed him in a prison in Rome now. And he's awaiting his final trial. And death is certain for Paul.

In today's passage, he spends time reflecting about his impending death. Here's how Paul views his death. He describes it, first of all, in Old Testament sacrificial language as a drink offering, suggesting perhaps that he sees himself as laying down his life for the sake of the gospel of Christ. He also, though, refers to his death as a departure, which was a word used back then to describe the loosing of a ship from its moorings so it could go on a journey, which is a rather positive image, I believe. Then Paul looks back over his life as a believer and servant of Jesus, and he describes it in athletic terms. He sees his service to Christ, it appears, as the event, truly worth one's life and energies. So, he says, "I have fought the good fight," good meaning noble. And here we have an image from the arena, wrestling or perhaps a gladiatorial games. Paul says he has fought, exerted himself immensely, thrown himself into this in the name of Christ for the gospel, ever since the time of his conversion when he encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. He's followed and served Jesus passionately, telling others the good news of what God and Christ has done for all humanity at the cross and empty grave. And He's been appealing to all people to believe and receive Jesus for salvation. In other words, Paul has given his all in all for his all in all, Jesus Christ.

As you read the Book of Acts and Paul's Letters, you see, it's been a very tough match that Paul has fought. He's been jailed, beaten up, ridiculed, rejected because of his message. He lived in an uncomfortable life, constantly traveling from town to town by sea or land, experiencing shipwrecks and fatigue and hunger and thirst, as well as disappointments along the way. There were attempts made by hostile opposers to kill him. He never knew from day to day whether this might be it for him. It's been a tough match. But also, we are told as we look at scripture and Acts, it's been an effective match for Paul. Throughout his ministry there has come a whole string of house churches springing up through Asia minor, and hundreds, perhaps even thousands of people who believed the good news about Jesus and receive forgiveness for their sins

and eternal life, which is promised to all who receive Christ as Savior and Lord. So, he describes this as a good, noble effort. We might say this statement in this way today, "I have given it my best shot."

Paul says, "I finished the race." With these words we have a picture of a runner standing at the finish line, perhaps at the end of a grueling marathon. And Paul saying he has stayed the course. He's run the course that God has given him to run and now he's finished. He also says, to sum it up, he says, "I've kept the faith," meaning that he's been loyal to the gospel, given to him by Jesus. He's trusted in it fully. He stood up for it in the face of opposition. He safeguarded it from the false teachings of his day. He's boldly passed it on to others at every opportunity and lived the Gospel out in what he said and did.

And then he looks ahead. And he writes, "So now there's 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." Paul's looking ahead to judgment day. He says, well, we know, we say we believe in the judgment day, don't we, in our Apostle's Creed? "He will come to judge the living and the dead," as we talk about Jesus. Paul says, "I am going to receive eternal life with God, as a righteous son of God."

Now, what is the basis for Paul's confidence for this picture that he gives us of receiving this crown? Was it his own efforts for God? Absolutely not. It was because of the redeeming effort, instead of one who came before him, in whom Paul believed and placed his life in his hands, the one who lived the perfect life of righteousness, obedience that that no human being could possibly live. Being obedient, even unto the cross. And he too, announced his race was finished as he hung on that cross. It was a declaration of victory. Victory over what? Sin and death and Satan which held humanity captive away from their God. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," Paul has had said earlier on in another letter. And he was including himself and me and you as well. "The wages of sin is death." God loves us, but He can't ignore our sin. He's loving, but he's also just. You see, we're under his judgment. Our problem of sin, which is our rebelliousness and disobedience with thoughts and words and actions, as well as our selfish condition, which we're all born with, keeps us separated from having a relationship with God. And that means eternal death. So, God in his love for us sent Jesus his son, who lived the perfect sinless life that we could not

live. And he gave that life up as the perfect sacrifice for your sin and mine. So, when he said "It's finished" at the cross, the mission was now accomplished is what he meant. Our sinfulness was fully paid for. And God raised him on the third day, endorsing that sacrifice, and promises forgiveness for sin in life, everlasting to all who placed their trust in his son. Jesus Christ. So, when a person believes in him and receives Christ into his or her life, there's a wonderful exchange that takes place, you see. I give Jesus my filthy rags and he gives me his robe of righteousness. And then God sees me as a righteous son in his eyes.

And so Paul could say, as he considered his future death, the righteous judge Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, will be awarded the crown of righteousness to me, and welcome me into His Kingdom, into Heaven, not because of anything I've done. But what? Because of what Jesus has done for me! And that applies to all who have loved Christ's appearing, they who have trusted and followed and served him looking forward to his return. Heaven is a gift. Paul saying, "I've got that gift. I know where I'm headed because of what Christ has done for me." What a wonderful thing to know when you take your last breath that you will be with Jesus.

And a few statements later in his letter, after asking Timothy to come visit him soon and describing his dire situation in prison, Paul looks back on the faithfulness of the risen Jesus working in his life at the present time. And that's again why he has such faith in being able to say, "I know where I'm headed." He says,

Everyone else deserted me, but not Jesus. He faithfully stood with me just as he promised law. I'm with you always. He's never left me. He's proven himself faithful again and again. He's working in me through his spirit, giving me courage to face everything life has thrown at me. I don't know where I'd be without him.

He goes on to say,

Jesus has strengthened me, even in my weakness, so that I could boldly tell the gospel story to all the non-Jewish people who witnessed my preliminary hearing before a Roman judge. I couldn't have done that without Jesus. And he rescued me from the lion's mouth, meaning immediate death. I was spared from death at that time to stand trial before the emperor, later giving me another opportunity to tell the good news of Jesus to the emperor. Jesus is faithful, and I believe he'll always be faithful, even unto death.

So therefore, as Paul thinks about all this, looks at his death, which lies ahead, he writes, "He will rescue me from every evil indeed, and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom." In other words, "I am not going to be severed from him by any evil that comes my way, not even death. He's promised that to me. I belong to him and nothing can snatch me from his hand. I am his and he is mine forever." And considering all this, Paul breaks into a doxology of praise to Jesus as he sits chained in that prison cell: "To him, be glory forever and ever." Think about that. He's praising in prison with death at the door.

There was something I noticed as I pondered these last thoughts of a man facing death. And perhaps you noticed it too. His tone is so matter-of-fact. Even as death overshadows him, there is no fear in his words. Instead, there's a calmness, confidence, and praise. A bystander observing Paul's plight back in that day might have even asked. "He's so peaceful about all this. What's his story, anyway?" Well, it's really quite simple. Paul had a savior who knew who he knew would never desert him, and soon he would be bringing him to his heavenly home and Paul would see him face to face. That's not self-assurance being expressed here. It's the blessed assurance which comes from knowing Jesus Christ who died and rose again and promises eternal life with him. That's Paul's story.

And friend, that's your story, too. If you've placed your trust in Jesus as your savior and served him as your Lord, then remember Paul's words. He says, "Now there's laid up for me a 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." All believers. The future that Paul describes here for himself is promised to all who have loved Christ appearing, who trust in him and serve him. Because you soon discover in doing that that Jesus never deserts us. He's always there with us, and we know then that He will bring us safely into his heavenly Kingdom to live with him forever. For He has promised to his followers,

Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God. Believe also in me. In my father's house, there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare that place, I will come again and take you to myself. That where I am you may be also.

So, if you are a follower of Jesus, there is no need to panic and fear as you consider your future, your mortality, because you are Christ's forever. That is our comfort and

strength and assurance as we fight a good fight and run the good race for Jesus. He will bring us safely home to himself and we will see him face to face.

So let these last words of Paul's letters wash over you again and again and reassure you along the way as a believer in Christ. God has done a great thing for you through Jesus. Whenever you're starting to struggle and doubt and panic, I encourage you to turn to this passage and let the Holy Spirit minister to your soul through Paul's words.

I'm reminded of a story told by Pastor Leith Anderson in closing this message. He writes,

When I was a boy, a friend, and I took a detour on our walk home from school, we visited a new subdivision that was being built, and we discovered a tunnel under a new road. It was dark, long, and wet tunnel that kind of scared me. My friend insisted that we go through it, but there was no way I was going in there. I was scared. So, my friend went there without me. When he disappeared, out of sight into the darkness, I was sure he was a goner forever. I remember thinking how hard it would be to go tell his mother what happened to him. A few minutes later, though, to my surprise, he called to me from the road above the tunnel. He said that he'd gone all the way through, come out on the other side, and was now standing above me, telling me to come on through and that he would meet me on the other side. Many times since I thought that this was much like death, a long, dark and damp tunnel that seemed so dangerous and frightening. And then our friend Jesus stepped ahead of us, died on the cross and traveled the tunnel alone. He came out on the other side and now stands in Heaven, promising to meet us there as he says. "Follow me."

So, to Jesus be glory forever and ever. Let's pray, Lord, thank you for the gift of righteousness and the eternal life that is ours through faith in Christ. By the power of your Holy Spirit, may we fight the good fight for you and faithfully stay the course you've set before us until we see you face to face in your Heaven. Amen.