

Bound for the Promised Land

2 Timothy

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Bible Text: 2 Timothy 4

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Please take your Bibles and turn with me to 2 Timothy. This is the last letter of the apostle Paul that we have available to us. His life is nearing its end; he's in prison in Rome and he is awaiting execution. That execution will come. As he comes to the end of his life, he's concerned about succession but he's not so much interested in the succession of the apostolic office from one set of apostles to a new set of apostles, rather he is concerned with the apostolic succession of the gospel, that what he has passed on might be continually passed on to the next generation all the way down through the centuries until Jesus comes again. God buries his workmen but the work of God goes on. About a year or two before this, he's described himself as "Paul the aged" though he probably wasn't all that old in our terms. Nonetheless, all his efforts, all his energies, all the work he's done have worn him out and now he's awaiting execution.

You can see what he's thinking. You can see this is you look at verse 5 and verse 6. He's writing to Timothy. Timothy is going to continue on. Timothy is at the beginning or certainly at the middle of his ministry; life stretches out before Timothy and Paul says to Timothy, "As for you, always be sober-minded," keep your head, "endure suffering," take what's coming, "do the work of an evangelist," use any opportunity to get the gospel out, "fulfill your ministry," in other words, complete the task, the job that God has given to you as a minister of the gospel. As for you, it all stretches out ahead of you. As for me, look at verse 6, as for me, the contrast, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand"

In these verses that we're looking at today, Paul tells us something about his departure. He tells us something about his service and he tells us something about his confidence. He tells us something about his departure and when he talks about this, it's a euphemism, isn't it? He's thinking about death and dying, not one of the trendier subjects that we have today. As one comedian said, "It's not that I'm afraid of death, it's just that I don't want to be there when it happens," and Woody Allen is right, of course. None of us want to be there when it happens but it's going to happen whether we want to be there or not and the apostle is writing about this. Interestingly, Paul speaks about death in a very realistic way. He talks about falling asleep: you fall asleep here and you wake up in glory. He talks about being absent from the body: up to now you've lived your life in the body, you don't know how to express yourself without a body. If you love somebody, you want

to hug them with your body; if you want to eat something, you have to use your body to eat. You can't imagine living without a body but one day you're going to be absent from the body but know this, that when you're absent from the body, you're present with the Lord Jesus. He's present with us now within this room because we're here; we're his temple and he's with his temple but one day we will be there. We will be with him; we will be present with the Lord.

He doesn't get sentimental about death. He doesn't speak about "sweet" death as some of the poets have very foolishly done. Rather, to the apostle Paul, death is the last enemy, the very last enemy. As a Christian you are struggling day-by-day, moment-by-moment with all kinds of pressures and temptations and trials and questions and doubts and difficulties. The last enemy that all of us will face and we'll face him at different points in our lives, with greater or lesser intensity, with more or less pain depending on what we die of, for a prolonged or for an instantaneous moment, death is, however he presents himself, the last frontier, the last enemy that we will have to face as believers. What that means about life now, of course, is that all of us, whatever our ages, all of us are in the land of the dying. Philip Henry, the father of Matthew Henry the great Bible commentator, on his deathbed said to his family as they'd gathered around him that he was about to leave the land of the dying and go to the land of the living.

Look with me at how Paul describes this, he says, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering." It's the language, isn't it, of the temple? New Testament writers use that language a lot because they believe that that is the great mission of God in the world today: he's building a temple. It's not a physical building like this building, it's not a physical temple like Saint Peter's in Rome or the temple that was once in Jerusalem. This is a building made up of living stones. We were reminded of that at the beginning of the service. Real people being built on the foundation of Christ who is the cornerstone and the apostles, their apostolic teaching, and the prophets of the Old Testament. We're built on their faith and we are being built together into a holy temple. A place where God dwells and God meets with us.

The temple, in the Old Covenant, had three components to it: there was the Holy of Holies, that was the most holy place, that was the most sacred spot. In the Holy of Holies was the footstool of the throne of the invisible God. In the Holy of Holies, the high priest would go once a year. He would bring the blood of an animal and he'd sprinkle it on the top of that footstool, the mercy seat, as a sign that the atonement had been made, the sacrifice for sin for the nation had been accomplished. The high priest stood there sprinkling the blood as a sign that that sacrifice was made. Today that holy place, of course, is in heaven. You read the book of Revelation and there you see it. Read the book of Hebrews, there it is, "Christ has entered into that holy place." The most holy place, the Holy of Holies. There he stands. His very presence there, like a lamb that's just been slain with the wounds of his suffering, is the great basis of our confidence this morning as we gather in this room. Our confidence before God is this: that in his immediate presence, we have a great high priest; before the throne of God above, I have a great high priest whose name is love who ever lives and pleads for me.

Then, as well as the Holy of Holies, there is the holy place. The holy place is where candles were lit; great lanterns were lit as a shining light to the world. There was the basin where the priests could wash themselves clean, that they could serve God there in the holy place where only priests functioned. Today, of course, every believer, male and female, old and young, every believer is a priest; we are a kingdom of priests. The holy place represents the church. It's the place where together we shine as a light in the world. Together we serve God and receive his washing, the washing of the word of God that cleanses our minds and our hearts. It's here in the holy place with God's people as the walls, as it were, of this earthly temple, we serve God by offering sacrifices. We've only this morning offered a sacrifice of praise to God. We've offered a sacrifice of our tithes and offerings to God for his service. Later on we will offer our bodies to God before we go out those doors, or you get beamed up to your starship somewhere, before we leave the building you will have offered your body to God and said, "What I'm going to do tomorrow morning and the rest of next week, whatever it is whether secular or spiritual, wherever it may be, I'm offering my body now to you for you to use me for your service wherever you place me." The holy place.

Then there is the court of the temple. This is the visible place. This is where the sacrifices were offered. Paul refers to one sacrifice in particular that happens right at the very end of the sacrificial system after the sacrifice for sin has been offered. For us today, that was offered at Calvary 2,000 years ago and is not repeatable, but at the very end of the whole process, one of the priests stands up publicly and he takes a glass of wine, it's a bit of a waste of wine, by the way, but nonetheless this is what he does: he takes the wine and he gradually pours out the wine slowly pouring it until it's emptied onto the ground. Paul says that pouring out of the wine represents the total life of a Christian person whether they're an apostle or a minister or not. All of us. It occurs after all the sacrifices have been made; it's visible to the world. What the world sees is the outpouring of a life to the glory of God.

They see you. Your colleagues at work see you. Your family and friends who don't believe, see you. They see the life you lived poured out in the service of your God, to a greater or lesser degree, to a more or less effective degree. That's what they see. They see you criticized. They see you spoken against. They see you ridiculed by the media. They see you mistreated. In some parts of the world, watching my webcast this morning, they may see you actually physically being abused for the gospel. They see you as you face illness. They see you as things come into your life that you weren't expecting, those surprises that are terrifying to you. Those surprises that occur in a moment of time; you'd never have thought of them and they occur and they disrupt your life. As the world looks on, they see you.

Here is Paul, you see, he's saying that at the end of his life, this is where he is. He has been poured out. His particular life poured out in the work of the kingdom of God supporting others in their lives, persevering in ministry, building up the body of Christ. His life is being poured out and now it's near the dregs of the cup. There is not much left and the final drop will fall. That process is the process of dying. Not just dying physically, but dying every day to ourselves; dying to our reputation; dying for Jesus.

But Paul says, the hour of my departure is at hand. Do you notice that? The end of dying will mean the beginning of life. This word “departure” is very interesting. It’s being used of a boat so here is the apostle painting the picture for us as the last dregs of that wine are poured out, as it were, before the watching world, as his life, in a moment, will be cut off literally. For Paul, it was to be cut off, his head was to be cut off. I told the children at the first service, I went down to the Sunday School and I told them that. The little boys were so excited when I told them about the fact that the apostle Paul ended his life being beheaded and I told them that I’d been to Rome and I’d been to the place where the apostle Paul and guess what they have of the apostle Paul? The boys guessed without any hesitation, they guessed “they have the apostle Paul’s head.” They were right. The head is there. You don’t get to see it, but it’s there in one of the churches in Saint Paul’s outside the wall in Rome.

Well, that last drop of blood was going to be spilled violently for the apostle but he says, “As I expect that last drop of blood to flow from the cup to the ground, I have my ticket in my hand. I am ready for my departure.” Notice what he’s saying: not his end, “my departure.” I asked the children, “What is Paul going to leave behind?” The first little one said, “The earth.” That was absolutely right. He’s going to leave the earth. Another one said, “He’s going to leave this life.” That’s absolutely right. He’s going to leave this life and he’s going to leave behind his body, isn’t he? He’s going to leave behind his body. “The hour of my departure, my leaving of this earth, this life, everything that is familiar. These trees, that sun, you people, leaving, departing. I’m leaving this body. Up to now I’ve needed my body for everything that I’ve done in my life to express myself. In order to talk, I’ve needed my hands; more than my mouth, actually, I need my hands. I can’t talk without my hands.” We’ve needed our bodies for everything we have done: to pick up food to eat it and all the rest of it. All these things that we’ve needed our bodies to do, imagine leaving that behind.

Paul says, “The hour of my departure is at hand.” He’s standing with his ticket because he’s not going to end when he departs. He is going somewhere. He is going somewhere. I remember Lincoln Duncan wrote a little report on the death of David Wright. Professor Wright was a professor at New College, Edinburgh and he terrified generations of post-graduates who were afraid of him because, as they said, “David has read everything twice.” He had an outstanding mind. In his report, Lincoln Duncan wrote this: “He died in Edinburgh with his beloved wife, Anne Marie, holding his hand as he left Jordan’s stormy banks.” He was echoing the words of a spiritual,

“On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye.
To Canaan’s fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.
I am bound for the Promised Land.”

That’s our destination. Paul is saying to Timothy, “The time for my departure from here to the Promised Land is at hand.” It’s the idea of taking a boat across the river or across

the sea. For me it conjures up memories as a student of my taking the boat from Scotland over to Ireland where my girlfriend was, actually, where my college was and where my future was to be. He says, "The hour of my departure is near at hand. I'm going to be with Christ which is by far the best." He tells us something about his departure.

Secondly, he tells us something about his service. Look in verse 7. Before this new adventure starts, he looks back over about 30 years of ministry and there he was in prison, he's chained to the wall and he's chained to a soldier. Anyone looking on would have mocked his trials and the struggles he'd endured. They might have regarded him as foolish and yet he summarizes his personal testimony in three phrases. Do you notice this? "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race," or the course, "I have kept the faith." He is giving us a survey of a life lived to the glory of Christ.

"I fought the good fight." To join the Christian church is to be enlisted in a battle; it is a war. He's told Timothy in his first letter, 1 Timothy 1, "Wage the good warfare holding faith and a good conscience." He says at the end of that first letter, "Fight the good fight of faith." In the second letter, chapter 2:3, "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." Phil Ryken in his commentary on 1 Timothy reminds us, or reminded me, of an old Sunday School chorus that we used to sing, "I'm in the Lord's army." I don't think he sang it, actually.

"I may never march with the infantry,
Ride with the cavalry,
Shoot the artillery.
I may never fly o'er the enemy,
But I'm in the Lord's army. (hey!) (yes, sir!)"

That one. Phil didn't sing it? No, okay. He would have now.

Every believer is a soldier in the army and its ministers are the officers. The Christian life is war. We don't wrestle with flesh and blood, we wrestle against rulers and authorities and cosmic powers of this present darkness and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. We wrestle and Paul calls it a good fight. Good fight.

He knows what a bad fight is like. A bad fight is when Christians fight each other over things that are nonsense. Like in my first church in Ireland, there were some people in the church, just a couple of people actually, but they started a fight because a young couple of girls were converted in a Bible study group that my wife ran and they came to church Sunday morning and they came to church and they weren't wearing a hat on their head and the big fight broke out because they didn't have anything covering their heads. That's not a good fight. Some people fight about what kind of music we should have. I mean, we have our own choice of music that we have here. It's the right choice, but we're humble about it but it's not a good thing to fight about. It's not a mature thing to fight about. We have enough to fight about.

Paul talks about this good fight. What did he fight for? He fought for the truth of the gospel. He fought for the central doctrines of the Christian faith. The church has always had to do that. Always had to do that. Always had to combat false doctrine and proclaim true doctrine. The prophets of the Old Covenant, what did they have to do? They had to speak against the false prophets who lied to the people, who had false visions and lying divinations and distorted the truth of God. In the New Testament, in Jude, we are “to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints.” In the period right after the death of the apostles, the patristic period, the church had to defend the truth of the Trinity at Nicea. It had to defend the grace of God over against man-centered doctrines like the Pelagian doctrine at Ephesus in 431. It had to defend the divine human nature in one person of Christ at Constantinople in 381, in Ephesus in 431, at Chalcedon in 451 and at the Reformation, the church had to defend and rearticulate Scripture alone as the only basis for faith and practice, Christ alone as the only Mediator between God and a human being, faith alone as the only instrument by which men and women might be put right in God and grace alone, not as some substance that is transposed through water or bread or the sacrament but grace as a characteristic of God who loves us. God who loves us unconditionally or, at least, on the condition of what Jesus would do for us. This sound doctrine, this healthy teaching, Paul had fought for. He’d spent his life for. He’d given himself to get the gospel out and to keep the gospel safe from harm.

Then he says, “I have finished the race.” That is, “I’ve run the course. I’ve done what was set out before me. I had to run from A to B and I’ve run from A to B. I’m nearly at B. B is within sight.” Paul had been given a commission. His commission was to take the gospel to the nations that are described in the book of Isaiah and he had done that deliberately. He had to start at his own home town which is mentioned by Isaiah. He had to go through a series of nations that you find in Asia Minor and up to Spain, all of which are outlined in that book and Paul had seen that as his great commission to fulfill that prophetic word and to complete the course and he had done that. Now he’s in Rome, he’s probably been to Spain, he’s now in Rome and he’s in prison and he’s able to say, “I have finished the race.” Earlier on he’d said, it’s recorded in Acts 20, “I don’t account my life of any value or as precious to myself. If only I may finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” That’s what he’d done.

“I finished the course and I’ve kept the faith.” That’s his third thing: “I’ve kept the faith.” He’s not saying, “I’m still a believer.” He’s saying something else here, he’s saying that he has kept the faith that was given to him, the faith, the content of which had been laid out for him in what he calls “the pattern of sound words,” or “the word of truth.” He’s told Timothy that Timothy is to guard the shape of that truth and he’s to proclaim accurately the word of truth. And he’s just spoken in this letter about people who have swerved away from the truth and others who will not put up with sound doctrine, they will not hear it, they block their ears to it. And he’s saying to us that he has not swerved from the truth and he has not found it hard to endure the sound of good doctrine. He has kept the faith.

Do you know one of the dangers of age? I say this to those of you who are elders particularly but to all of you who are aging, growing in your faith: the danger is that you become softer as you get older. Now, there's a nice softness, of course. I mean, you really would want to see me here long enough that I'd become a cuddly kind of minister. You are really wanting and praying for that I'm quite sure. You may have to wait a while but hopefully that will happen but I hope this will not happen, I want you to check me on this one: I hope that as I get older that I don't become fuzzy on the gospel. Now, don't get to that stage where some ministers get to where because they want to leave a good impression and because they want to leave with friends and because they don't want to rock the boat and because they don't want to have an argument just towards the end of their ministry, they soft-pedal the truth of the gospel. Do you know what happens so much? That the older you get, the more theologically left you go until you have nothing left on the left where there is nothing. I'm speaking theologically, of course. Paul says, "I've kept the faith."

So, he tells us something about his departure, he tells us something about his service and thirdly, he tells us something about his confidence. Look in verse 8, "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day." What is this crown of righteousness? To some people like Tom Wright, it's a reference to the final judgment and justification, that is being made right with God on the basis of a whole life lived. But I want you to notice that he's not talking in this context here about justification or even salvation. If you go back to how we started, do you notice the contrast? He's contrasting it with his charge to Timothy to get on with the business that he'd been given to do, the work that he'd been given to do, the clear-headed, sober-minded endurance of suffering and take what's coming, do the work of the an evangelist and get the gospel out, fulfill your ministry. It's the context of service not salvation. He's talking about his own work, his own service, his life of obedience to the Lord Jesus and he's saying that he looks forward to something which every believer can look forward to. Do you notice that? Every believer. He's not distinguishing between himself and other believers. He's not like some of these pre-millennial, mid-trib and whatever they are, secret selective rapture people. Only those who love his appearing. So, one of these days, those who are actually looking forward to Jesus coming back again are going to disappear just like that. Poof. That's a theological word. Poof. Off they go, they've gone and the rest of us who are not looking for his coming, we've got to wait until the end. That's not what he's talking about here. That's a load of nonsense.

He puts himself where all of us are: those who have loved his appearing and on that day he says on his arrival in glory in the presence of the angels and all the saints and the watching universe, he will be given a crown of righteousness. A crown that's been earned by Christ and given to Paul. That's the righteousness. He refers to a number of things. When he talks about crowns, Paul mentions this garland of victory. Don't think about the kind of crown that Queen Elizabeth wears, by the way, it's just a wreath. It's the Olympic Games, a wreath that's put around your head. You won't be able to take it to the pawn shop and get anything for it but it talks about a crown of life, a crown of boasting, a crown of glory, an imperishable crown. And the qualifier of the crown tells you what it

is: it brings life. It brings imperishability. It brings glory into your life, the glory of God. You into the glory of God.

And it's a crown of righteousness. What's the context? He's in prison; he's been through a trial; he's been condemned; he's in the condemned man's cell. Execution awaits him. The world has found him guilty but his eye is not on Nero, the human judge, his eye is on the judge above Nero, the supreme Judge. His eye is on the one Judge of all the earth who does what is right. Do you notice that? The Lord. The righteous Judge. That's what he's thinking about. He'll make the right call. The world may have condemned me, but on that day I will be vindicated by God, cleared by God. That in fact, why I'm suffering is not because I was a wrongdoer, but because I was a servant of the Lord Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, while the judgment may appear at times to be a frightening thing to you, let me say to you that you need to know and you will need to know that things that have gone wrong to you have been put right finally. That the miscarriages of justice in this world will be put right by God who is the righteous Judge on that day. You need to know that. That works its way out, by the way, in your own Christian life in the answer to your own questions. Where people have abused you or misused you, that they don't get off Scot-free. That the mass murderers of this world don't get off Scot-free. I hate that phrase, by the way, Scot-free. Anyway. I don't know what it means. Scots would never give you anything free. That's an English lie, by the way, of slander against us.

He looks to the righteous Judge who will give him a crown of righteousness, a mark of vindication that they've suffered and believed in Jesus. So, to receive the crown of righteousness is to receive righteousness. Today for the believer, righteousness, that is a right standing, is reckoned to us. On that day, we will be made righteous. Today, we are in a position of righteousness. On that day, we will be in a state of righteousness, a perfect state. We will be like Jesus.

The apostle John and his little first book that we call 1 John talks about the day of Jesus appearing and he says, "You know, today at this point in history, it does not yet appear what we shall be. You look at believers and you don't see them the way they're going to be." Maybe you're not Christian and you're here this morning and you look around and you think, "Well, these people look like everybody else." Of course they do. They are young, old, good-looking, bad-looking, better-looking. I see them all as perfect, actually. But you may see flaws. I don't see any flaws. I think they're a great bunch because the Lord has enabled me to see as I look around in this congregation that one day these people you are sitting among in this room will look to you as gods. They will look to you as gods. With glorified bodies that will take your breath away for beauty, for dignity, with perfect, perfect natures. We're not perfect yet. We have our hang-ups; we are sinners; we have to confess our sins. We do that honestly every Sunday. We do that because we know we are sinners but one day without sin.

"When he appears," John says, Jesus, "when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is." Now you understand why he says that this "for all who love his appearing." But you say, "I don't really think a lot about this appearing of Jesus, the

Second Coming of Jesus. Is it true of me? That I love his appearing?" Let me tell you why I think you love his appearing even though you may not be conscious of it: if you're a Christian person, what do you do? You believe in Jesus. Have you seen him? No. Why do you believe in Jesus? Because you believe God raised him from the dead. Is that true? You believe God raised him from the dead so you believe in Jesus whom you haven't seen. Where does your hope lie? Your hope lies in the risen Lord Jesus whom you haven't seen but in whom you've believed. Why do we love his appearing? Why do we love the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ? Why do we love his appearing? We love his appearing because on that day, do you see, on that day, every doubt will evaporate, every fear will be driven away. Our faith will be confirmed. "There he is! I believed in him when I couldn't see him. I trusted his word when I'd never heard his voice and there he is! There he is, the Lord Jesus Christ. There he is!" Every eye shall see him. Every eye shall see him. "All my unbelieving friends who denied him and laughed at me and mocked me and ridiculed me and rejected me. There he is!" And if you suffered for him, "There he is in all his splendor." That's why we love his appearing. It is our glory day. It is our vindication day. It is our day of confirmation. It is our day of supreme joy when we see him. We see him. We see him as he is. That's why we love his appearing.

What Paul is saying, "On that day, all who love his appearing," that is every believer, "will be given a crown of righteousness." They'll see on that day, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" They'll see on that day that "nothing has been able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." That day will be our resurrection day: glorified body. That day will be our transformation day: made like the Lord Jesus perfectly. That day will be earth renovation day: a new heavens and a new earth in which pollution and sin and the second law of thermodynamics no longer operates, no more deterioration, decay, death. No longer any of that stuff. That day will have arrived and to prove it, you'll be there. You'll be there with God's people. You'll be there. You love his appearing.

Back in 1681, Donald Cargill was executed for his faith in the Lord Jesus. On the morning of his execution, he handed a note to a friend who had come to visit him in prison and on the note he wrote this: "This is the most joyful day that ever I saw in my pilgrimage on earth. My joy is now begun which I see shall never be interrupted. This day I am to seal with my blood all the truths that I ever preached. I am no more terrified at death, nor afraid of hell because of sin than if I had never sinned for all my sins are freely pardoned and washed thoroughly away through the precious blood and intercession of Jesus Christ." And when they led him out and he climbed the ladder to the scaffold, he declared to the watching crowd, "The Lord knows that I go up this ladder with less fear, less confusion, less perturbation of mind than I ever entered a pulpit to preach."

Paul says, "My life is being poured out." Yours is being poured out. For some of you there is more in the jar than for others but one day the last drop will fall and those of you who have a ticket for departure will cross over stormy Jordan to the other side and the trumpets will blow and there will be people to greet you as you arrive. There you will see the King in his beauty, in Emmanuel's land.

Let's pray.

Father, we ask this morning that you would work in our hearts. Give us the hope of glory. Help us to see this great thing that lies before us as your people, the end of dying and the beginning of life. We pray in Jesus' strong name. Amen.