

November 3, 2013
Pentecost 23

"Facing the Future with Confidence"

2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8 AND 16-18

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing. ¹⁶ At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. ¹⁷ But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

In the 23rd Psalm we confess, "Goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord." With these words we confess two future blessings that fill our lives with confidence. The goodness and mercy of the Lord will be with you no matter what problems and troubles you face in this life. Then, after you die you will live in the house of the Lord forever.

A dear Christian woman was facing a life threatening surgery. She told her friend she was not afraid because if she died she would be with the Lord and if she lived through the surgery the Lord would be with her. "If we live we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Romans 14:7)

The Apostle Paul is a prisoner in Rome. He knows that it will not be long before he dies. He writes a letter to young pastor Timothy filled with hope and confidence in what the future will bring. This morning we want you to look more closely at this confidence he has in facing the future. This is also the confidence that is yours because of Jesus your Savior.

Future Glory

The Apostle Paul is confident that when death comes he will receive a crown of righteousness. "For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I kept the faith. Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing."

Paul knows it won't be long before the Roman guards will lead him out of his prison cell to the place of his execution. The henchman will sever his head from his body. Blood will pour out on the ground. He describes his death as a drink offering. In some of the Old Testament sacrifices wine was poured out on the lamb or bull as it was being sacrificed. For Paul it was an honor to shed his blood for Jesus, because Jesus has shed his blood for

him at the cross. It is always a privilege to suffer for Christ out of love for the way Jesus suffered for us.

Paul also speaks of his death as a departure. The word for departure has the thought of untying something or letting it lose. Ships were untied so they could set sail. Tents were untied so you could move on to a new location. Paul wrote to the people of Corinth, "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not made by human hands." We are homeless people living each day in temporary circumstances until we are released to enter into the eternal house that our Lord Jesus has prepared for us. The Lord knows exactly how many heart beats of time you have left on this earth. He knows exactly when you will pick up your tent and move from the church militant to the church triumphant.

There are no regrets as Paul looks back at the life he was privileged to live for the Lord. "I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith, I have finished the course." The word here for fight is the Greek word *agonizo* from which we get our word "agony." Paul had his share of agonizing struggles. He wrote about them in his letter to the Corinthians, "Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way; in great endurance; in troubles, in hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger." He spoke in Romans 7 of the daily struggle he had with his weak sinful flesh. You can relate to that. In spite of all the struggles and even the failures which he acknowledged he has no regrets. He is proud of what he was able to accomplish because it was all done through the power which his ascended Lord Jesus provided him. He said in Philippians, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

He was confident his sinful past was forgiven including his terrible persecution of his fellow Jews who had become Christians. To be sure he may still have had flashbacks to little children screaming: "Mommy and daddy." He tore men and women from their homes, bound them and took them back to Jerusalem to be put to death by. He wrote to the citizens in Rome, "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." At the end of an agonizing day of trying to live our lives for Christ and struggling with our sinful flesh we fall asleep at night with the assurance that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.

Paul knows the past is forgiven. He also knows the future is secure as he looks forward to his crown of righteousness. "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will award to me on that day. Just think, the Lord has a crown of righteousness stored up for you. Jesus said, "I am going to prepare a place for you."

That word "in store for you" brought back memories of my childhood. We had a large garden. My mother put huge amounts of fruit and vegetables into canning jars which were stored on shelves of the large farmhouse in which we lived. Many times we were told to go down to the basement and bring up a jar of green beans, or corn, or pickles, or applesauce, or tomatoes. I can even remember going into that back basement and forgetting what she asked to bring up from that storeroom. Jesus has a crown of righteousness stored up for you, waiting on the shelf if you will, and he won't forget to give it to you on the last day.

How do you qualify for this crown of righteousness or crown of glory? Paul says, "which the Lord the righteous Judge will award to me on that day-and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." How do you get a trophy or crown of righteousness on the last day? It certainly can't be on the basis of how well you have performed your life here on this earth. Take a picture of any part of your life this past week. Use a high definition camera. You will see that even in your shining moments you will see yourself falling short of God's glory. Paul knew he did not have a righteousness that could qualify him for the crown. That is why he tells us in Philippians 3, "That I might gain Christ and be found in him, not have a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ."

A couple of weeks ago we were discussing original sin in our Thursday morning Bible study. We talked about how Adam and Eve were given the privilege of being able not to sin. But after the fall into sin they were so corrupted by the sinful flesh that they were not able not to sin. Someday in heaven we will enjoy wearing a crown of righteousness given to us by Jesus as a free gift. With that crown of righteousness or crown of glory or crown of life we will be in that whole new world where we will not be able to sin. It is called a home of righteousness.

Paul was looking forward to wearing that crown with all those who have longed for his appearing. How we long for Jesus to return in glory, even now before this church service comes to an end. We long to spend eternity with those who will someday join us because of their faith in Jesus. "After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." Such is our confidence. Such is our hope.

Future strength

What if the Lord delays his return? What if really hard times come for you in the future? Paul has words of comfort for any tribulations that life may bring to you before Jesus returns. "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them." Paul had his glorious moments in life when dear Christians offered him tremendous support and encouragement. We think of that time when he said goodbye to the Christians in Ephesus. He knelt down and prayed. Then they wept as they embraced him and kissed him. Then there were the sad and lonely times when people seemed to forget him. Later in this letter to Timothy he writes, "Only Luke is with me." The Lord gave him the strength to forgive those who failed him.

Paul knew he was not alone. There is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper. "But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it." Sitting in prison gave Paul lots of time to reflect on how the Lord had been there for him in difficult times. I wonder how often this Hebrew of the Hebrews who probably knew most of the psalms from memory prayed the words of Psalm 46 to himself, "God is our Refuge and Strength an every present help in trouble." He knew Jesus as his Lord and God. He knew the risen and ascended Lord Jesus who appeared to him on the road to Damascus was taking care of his church. He writes confidently, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever."

"The Lord stood by my side and gave me strength." What if you could do a Google search and spot the places in your life where you went through what Pilgrim's Progress calls "The Slough of Despond." And what if that same search engine could also show you all the places where the Lord stood by your side and strengthened you. Is it any wonder then why Martin Luther said the Christian is always an optimist? There will be hard days of great tribulation for all of us. The Lord Jesus knows those days and has already planned how he is going to stand by your side just as he did for Paul.

I am going to close this sermon by having you say something with me that expresses our confidence and hope after hearing these words from the inspired pen of the Apostle Paul. Here are the words. Listen to them. "The past is forgiven. The future is guaranteed. The present is exciting." Now let me repeat them again. Then say them again with me. Amen.