

Fight the Good Fight

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

⁶ As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give 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 all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! ¹⁷ But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, 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. ¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

This has been an interesting week. There were two funerals on Monday. One was the wife of an accountant that I work with at Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit. As I was debating on supporting my coworker by attending his wife's funeral mass I received a phone call from the wife of one of my former direct reports to notify me of his death and to inform me that his funeral was also scheduled for Monday. Also we all heard or read of the death of Elijah Cummings, U.S. representative from Baltimore, Maryland. You may have even watched portions of his funeral on television or on your computer. Each of these were people of faith and for each we celebrated their faith and assurance of God's mercy and grace. Each was reported to have "fought the good fight!"

I'm not sure who in your life modeled a life of faith and "fighting the good fight." Maybe it was a parent, a relative, a friend, a neighbor, a teacher who modeled faith. You already know for me; it was my father who was my spiritual mentor. My dad died in 1986, but he rejoiced that he had the opportunity to hear his own eulogy before his death. In 1981 my parents had a house fire that totally destroyed the house, but they were blessed that there was no loss of life. The community came together to tell them how much they meant to the community where my mother had lived from a small child and where my father had lived since

he was a young adult. My father said it was like attending his own funeral, as so many nice things were said about him by so many people. My father learned that he was appreciated by his adopted town and his church. He knew he would be remembered, and that others recognized his faith and endurance.

Today's scripture is in the framework of Paul's end-of-life reflections. In it, we get to know a Paul who was no longer traveling about the Mediterranean. His adventuring days were done. He was through venturing the seas. He was through walking the city streets and finding the odd job to support his itinerant ministry. Now he whiled away his days sitting in a Roman prison, awaiting the very probably violent end of his life. We are privy to his review of his life's journey and his preparation for the final trek into the unknown.

In his reflection, Paul characterized the end of his life as a sacrifice, as a drink poured out and offered as a libation. Earlier, in Philippians 2:17, Paul had entertained this concept of martyrdom. He told the Philippians that even if his life should be poured out for the sake of their faith, he took "great pleasure" in them. His exuberant assurance, however, was still theoretical at that point, despite the suffering that he had endured from time to time. Now he was where he had earlier imagined he might be. As he sat there in that dank Roman prison, a very tough and unjust death almost certainly awaited him. What was he thinking now?

What he was thinking encompassed the broad themes of life and death, justice and injustice, betrayal and forgiveness, and finally, good and evil. Interestingly, Paul has few regrets. As he came to his end, he assessed his vocation and its fulfillment positively with the familiar robust, even athletic, spirituality that we have come to associate with Paul. He wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (v. 7). He seemed content that the degradation he was enduring was not his ultimate reality; his shame did not define him. Rather, he looked toward an alternative reality. Paul imagined that the Lord

of justice would crown him and all those who love and look for the appearance of the Lord with justice. Where the situation in which Paul found himself was so blatantly unjust, the "justice" of God is where he found his hope! Even martyrdom, the highest human acquiescence to injustice for God's sake, became doable in his steady belief that God is the ultimate arbiter of justice.

Paul did not stop there. Paul understood that God's justice is ultimately rooted in God's mercy and that both God's justice and God's mercy entail a human requirement beyond martyrdom and suffering. After some personal comments to Timothy, which are delightfully mundane (Paul reminds Timothy to bring the coat he left with Carpus when he comes), Paul remembered with sadness the desertion he experienced in his first trial. No one took his part, he lamented (v. 16), but he forgave them. He hoped that the act of betrayal would not be held against those who deserted him. Paul's naming the betrayal and extending the hope for mercy was not accidental. This act of love, one of his last, grew out of a lifetime of observing the interplay between justice and mercy in the lives of those who follow the just and merciful God. It is at the heart of the Jewish faith into which he was born and to which he remained faithful to his dying day. It is at the heart of the ministry of the Jesus to whom he relinquished his many talents and extraordinary zeal after meeting him, alive, on the road to Damascus.

The reason that Paul was able to let go of the wrongs done to him was the reason he was, so long before, able to let go of his own violent ways, his enthusiastic persecution of those of his fellow Jews who chose to follow Jesus, in order to join his lot with them and accept the accompanying suffering. It was the reason that Jesus before him was able to let go of the temptation of the sword and accept the cross in Luke 22. In the final analysis, like the author of 1 Peter, Paul trusted the faithfulness of the one "who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23). He saw his life

story within the larger framework of his trust in the Lord who overcomes evil. The lion's mouth is not the end. **Mary H. Schertz**

The message of 2 Timothy is that in the face of opposition, persecution, suffering, and even impending death, the Lord is always present to provide the necessary strength to fight the good fight, to finish the race, and to keep the faith. Therefore, with confidence believers, you and I, continue in the faith (3:14), knowing that on the day of the Lord's judgment, a crown of righteousness awaits all those who finish the race. **Guy D. Nave Jr.**

Because of what Jesus has done Mary Fong, my accountant friend's wife; Pernell Banks, my former employee; Elijah Cummings, U.S. representative of Baltimore; my father, Leroy Wilson; our brothers and sisters who have walked before us and who are now at home with the Lord, those we celebrate on All Saints Day; and you and I can say "I have fought the good fight and finished my course."

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