

Contemplating Death and the Clarity it Brings

2 Timothy 4:6-8

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on 10/16/2011

Introduction

- ❖ After 15 straight hours of swimming, Florence Chadwick strained her eyes forward, desperately searching for land. But all she could see around her was fog – thick, soupy fog. And at this point, weary with exhaustion, all she could think about was quitting.
 - Three years earlier in 1950, Chadwick had broken the world record by swimming the English Channel in 13 hours and 20 minutes. But on this day, July 4, 1952, she was determined to become the first woman to swim from Catalina Island to mainland California – a mind-blowing 21 miles through rough ocean waves. But the fog was so thick she could hardly see her support boats. Sharks would cruise toward her but were driven away by rifle shots. Against the icy grip of the sea, she struggled on hour after hour, while millions watched on national television.

- ❖ Fifteen hours in, she was past her breaking point. Her mother yelled encouragement from one of the boats urging her not to quit, but staring into the fog, she lost all hope and asked to be pulled out. It wasn't until she was safely on the boat that she discovered the shore was less than half a mile away. At a following news conference she explained why she quit. She said, *“All I could see was the fog. Look, I'm not excusing myself, but I think that if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.”*

- ❖ **Friends, I'm convinced that a big reason why we often find it so hard to persevere in the Christian life is because we don't have a clear view of the shore.** Ask yourself: *Why are so many Christians discouraged and lacking in joy and contentment? Why do so many feel overwhelmed by the high costs of Christian discipleship – some even on the verge of leaving the faith? Why are so many so burdened by their daily struggle with sin to the point that they feel powerless and without hope?*
 - Answer: It's because we can't see the shore. The fog of this world, the fog in our lives, has obscured our view. We've lost sight of the shore, and all we can see are the rough waves around us that threaten to take us down.

- ❖ *What then is this shore that Christians need to keep our eyes on? **The shore would be all the future realities that lies just beyond our death in this body.*** What I'm suggesting is that having a clearer view of death and the realities to come can strengthen a believer's resolve to keep the faith. In other words, by contemplating your death from a biblical perspective, you will gain a clearer focus in life and a greater desire to finish well.
 - I realize Death is a queasy subject for most people. We don't like to think about our own death, much less talk about it. But if you know Jesus and if you trust in his death and resurrection, then you can greet this shore with genuine longing. You can contemplate your own death with the hope of all things being made new.

- ❖ **This morning's passage helps us see the shore because as the Apostle Paul contemplates his own death, we're urged to do the same.** I know for some of you the thought is creepy, and you'd prefer to distract yourself with your work or busy schedule. But I encourage you to take this opportunity to look upon your death and to think deeply on it.

- Our passage leads us to ask three questions as we contemplate our death: 1) What kind of departure will you make? 2) What kind of legacy will you leave? and 3) What kind of future do you have in store?

Context

- ❖ First, let me quickly set chapter 4:6-8 in its larger context in 2 Timothy. This is important because our passage should be read as an extension of Paul's charge to Timothy earlier in v2 to "*preach the word*". That is, to boldly, faithfully, and clearly proclaim the gospel message of God's grace to everyone he puts in our lives.
 - In vv3-4, he explains the urgency of this charge in light of their current situation. If you recall, the church Timothy was pastoring in Ephesus was facing persecution *for* the faith from people without and desertion *of* the faith from people within.
 - Paul warns that the days are coming when people will no longer endure sound doctrine but will turn away from the truth. That is why it's so urgent for Timothy to be ready to preach the word, in season or out – that is whether circumstances are favorable or not.
- ❖ And now in vv6-8, Paul further explains why this charge to preach the word, to do the work of an evangelist, and to fulfill your ministry (v5) is so urgent. He points to his impending death – his anticipated martyrdom for the faith. Remember, Paul is writing this letter from a dungeon in Rome. History tells us he was locked away by Nero in what is called the Mamertine prison, which you can still visit today.
 - So when Paul ends v5 telling Timothy to "*fulfill his ministry*", he goes on in v6 to say, "For (because) I am already at the point of martyrdom." My ministry is wrapping up, so I expect you to take the baton and to carry on this gospel ministry until God calls you home, until you fulfill your ministry.
- ❖ What Paul is trying to do in vv6-8 is to use his own life and experiences to motivate and encourage Timothy – and all believers by extension – to persevere in life, faith, and ministry by contemplating our own deaths and the future realities in store.

What Kind of Departure Will You Make?

- ❖ The first question we should ask when contemplating our death comes out of v6 and goes like this: **1) What kind of departure will you make?** In other words, what kind of death will you die? Will you depart this life in fear, kicking and screaming out the door? Or like Paul, will you depart in faith, even reckoning your death as gain?
- ❖ Well in v6, Paul alludes to his impending death by using two images: one borrowed from the temple and another, most likely, from the harbor. **First, he describes himself as "*already being poured out as a drink offering*".** There he's comparing his death to a particular OT sacrifice called a libation (aka. drink offering).

- In the Mosaic Law, priests were instructed to pour out wine at the base of the altar as they sacrificed a bull or lamb (cf. Ex 29:40-41; Lv. 23:13; Nu. 15:5-10). So as he speaks of his death, Paul evokes the image of red wine splashing down upon the altar.
 - It's likely he was aware that he was to be beheaded. Paul was a Roman citizen, and in those days under Nero, when Christians were being fed to wild animals, a citizen was offered a more merciful death.

- ❖ Now years earlier, in his first Roman imprisonment, Paul was writing to the Philippians and he said this, "*Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.*" (Phil. 2:17)
 - So what was once a possibility in Paul's mind is now a certainty here in v6. Well when death was only a possibility, he spoke of being glad and rejoicing at the prospect of dying, but does he feel the same way now – now that it's a certainty? Now that he is *already* being poured out?

- ❖ I believe his second image suggests that he still views his death as a good thing, as something he can be glad and rejoice over. **Notice how he goes on to say, "*and the time of my departure has come.*"**
 - That word "*departure*" literally means "loosening". Now that word has a few uses in the Greek. But one usage, in particular, describes the loosening (the untying) of a boat from its moorings. The picture is of a ship leaving its harbor being put out to sea. I think that is how Paul is describing his own death. **He sees it as a departure from this life, and the point is that he's sail for a better land.**

- ❖ Picture the ending of the *Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, when Frodo was at the harbor of the Grey Havens and because he faithfully carried the burden of the One Ring, he's granted the privilege of departing with Gandalf and the Elvish lords to sail to Valinor, the land of immortality. That's a beautiful picture of Christian death. It's a departure from one place to the next. It's the beginning of a new journey with the implication is that the story is not over. There is more life to be lived.

- ❖ Picture as well the ending of the Narnia series in *The Last Battle* on the last page where Aslan explains to the children that they're actually deceased but that "*for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.*"
 - Friends, how do you view your own death? **Do you see it as the start of a new and grander story? Or is it the sad ending to a life unfinished?** How you answer will determine how you depart.

- ❖ Recently there's been a number of high-profile deaths in the news. I'm sure you probably heard about the recent death of Apple co-founder and CEO Steve Jobs. Since then, I've seen and heard many people quote his 2005 Stanford commencement address where he made many references to his own mortality and future death.
 - There was one interesting statement he made that I want to share. He said, "***No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it.***"

- ❖ "No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there." I wonder how true that statement is. Christian, I know you want to go to heaven – but are you ready to die? Or are you terrified at the prospect of death?
 - You know, Jobs is right when he says that "death is a destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it." The Bible calls Death an enemy – our common enemy. It doesn't matter how strong you are, smart you are, or rich you are. All of us will one day die. No one has ever escaped it.

- ❖ Actually, that's not true. **There was one man who escaped the grips of death. His name is Jesus.** Yes, he did taste death on the cross when he died in place of sinners, but death could not hold him. On the third day, he rose from the grave, and all who hope in him have the hope of sharing in his resurrection.
 - **Friends, the good news of the gospel is that, even though we die, Jesus can save us from staying dead.** Yes, we will all die, but those who trust in Christ will rise with him because, according to Paul's own words in chapter 1:10, Jesus has "*abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*"

- ❖ ***But if Jesus 'abolish death' then why do we still die?*** What I think Paul means is that, because of what Jesus has done, the power of death is broken. One commentator says 'to abolish death' means Jesus 'rendered death ineffective'. He 'broke death's back'.
 - In 1 Corinthians, Paul says that Jesus' death and resurrection has taken the sting out of death (15:55-56). And he identifies the sting as sin. In other words, by dying for our sins and rising from the dead in triumph, Jesus made it possible for his followers to face a stingless death, a death that has been rendered ineffective.

- ❖ **That means what was once our enemy has been made our servant.** Because of Christ, death now serves us. It serves our best interest, for if we die, we gain because we get to be with Christ. That means for the Christian, there is a good reason to not fear in death. Why should you fear your servant? He works for you. He benefits you.

- ❖ ***Friends, what kind of departure will you make?*** It all depends on who you see waiting for you at the end of life. An enemy? Or a servant? If death is still your enemy, then you should fear it. I'd imagine you would be kicking and screaming on your way out.
 - But if you take Jesus at his word, if you call out to him – right now in your heart – for rescue, you can share in the hope of one day facing a stingless, powerless death.

- ❖ **For those who trust in Christ, death is not a final destination. It's a door to a better world. It's a departure to a better land.** It's the beginning of Chapter One of the Great Story in which every chapter is better than the one before.

What Kind of Legacy Will You Leave?

- ❖ The second question to ask yourself as you contemplate death is this: **2) What kind of legacy will you leave?** How will you be remembered? What kind of life will you have lived? Paul looks over the course of his life and can honestly say Timothy in v7, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."*
- ❖ The word "fight" in the original is *agonizoma*. The root *agon* is where we get the word 'agony'. This word was used in both the realm of combat and the realm of athletics, so Paul could have had in mind a fight or a race. Obviously a race would fit the context since the next clause is about finishing the race, but at the same time, throughout the letter, he's been using military imagery – urging Timothy to be a good soldier for Christ.
 - But regardless, what's in view is an intense struggle. Literally Paul is saying, *"I have agonized the good agony"*. I have fought a tough battle. I finished a difficult race.
- ❖ *"I have finished the race"* harkens back to Acts 20:24 when Paul was speaking to the Ephesian elders on the shores before he departed saying, *"But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."*
 - Notice that the course he's running is a synonym for his ministry – the ministry Jesus personally gave him to testify to the gospel of God's grace. And now in 2 Timothy 4 Paul can honestly say that he's finished his course. He has fulfilled his ministry.
- ❖ He also says *"I have kept the faith"*. Now that could mean one of two things. Either he has kept his own faith in the gospel OR he has kept *the* faith. He's guarded the gospel. Now in a letter that has been warning Timothy about false teachers and urging him to guard the gospel like a good deposit, Paul likely means that he has guarded and protected the gospel treasure entrusted to him – even unto death.
- ❖ **So in contemplating his death and the totality of his life, Paul could honestly testify to a life of perseverance, a life of faithfulness, a life well lived for the glory of God.** That was the legacy he left behind to inspire young men like Timothy to do the same.
 - And remember, this is Paul talking, the self-professed 'chief of sinners' (1 Tim. 1:15), a persecutor of the Church! You see, by the grace of God, a man as wicked as Paul can come to the end of his life and actually say he's fought the good fight, he's finished the race, he's kept the faith.
- ❖ *Friends, what kind of legacy will you leave behind?* When your children or your children's children look back on your life, what will they say?

- Will they simply say you were a churchgoer. You called yourself a Christian. You were the kind of person who dutifully gave your ten percent and showed up on Sunday mornings. That hardly sounds like someone who fought a good fight or finished a race or kept the faith.
- ❖ Have you heard the saying that goes like this, “**Only one life, tis soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last!**” Let that be your motto.
 - If your identity is wrapped up in the kind of grades you get or in the title in front of your name, if you’re just living for the next weekend or for that dream retirement or if you’re just living day to day with a purpose – remind yourself, “Only one life, tis soon be past”.
 - If your life is consumed by worldly pursuits – making a lot of money, getting the newest gadgets, being up-to-date with the latest fashion – tell yourself, “Only what’s done for Christ will last!”
- ❖ **Sometimes you need to contemplate your death and the one life you’ve been given. It grounds you. It focuses you. It’s a good and godly exercise.** May God use it to awaken you if you’re in a spiritual slumber. May he stir up your passions to spend your days consumed by something better, to leave a greater legacy behind.
 - May you be able to tell your children and children’s children that you fought the good fight, you finished the race, you kept the faith.

What Kind of Future Do You Have in Store?

- ❖ Now the third question to ask yourself as you contemplate death is this: **3) What kind of future do you have in store?** What’s waiting for you when you hit that shore? If you have a clear view of what’s in store, then you’ll be motivated to persevere in the Christian life, to keep going, to keep the faith.
 - Consider what Paul had in his view as he contemplated his death. Read v8 again, “*Henceforth (that’s just an indicator of time, NASB says ‘in the future’) 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.*”
- ❖ So Paul was keeping his eyes on a prize – a reward that the Lord has “*laid up*” for him. That word means to ‘store away’, ‘to put away for safe keeping’. The point is that God has something safely stored up in heaven to give his good and faithful servants after we die (see Col. 1:5).
- ❖ Paul calls it a crown. He didn’t use the word *diadema* where we get ‘diadem’ (a royal crown). That’s because there is only one person wearing a royal crown in heaven – that’s King Jesus. So the word Paul uses in v8 is *stephanos*, which refers to a garland, a wreath made of evergreen leaves.

- In those days, whenever a city magistrate had completed his term and was stepping down, the city would throw a special event in his honor, and they would put on his head an evergreen wreath, a crown to symbolize his faithful service.
 - So a *stephanos* was used for celebrations and special honors. It was also used to crown the winner of an Olympic game. It was the grand prize and honor for any ancient athlete, much like a gold medal today.

- ❖ Now Paul specifically calls it “*the crown of righteousness*”. That could also be translated as “the crown, which is righteousness”. And based on the way Paul uses the word ‘righteousness’ in his other letters, it would be natural to call it a ‘crown of justification’.
 - **I think the guilty verdict that Nero gave him at his last trial is probably still fresh in Paul’s mind, so he’s looking forward to the coming verdict that “*the Lord, the righteous judge*” will soon pronounce over him on that Day** – that is the day of judgment.

- ❖ In this life, an unrighteous judge declared him guilty and condemned him to death, but Paul looks forward to walking through death’s door, stepping onto the soft, white sands on the shores of heaven, and standing before the throne of the righteous judge.
 - And he can’t wait to hear his Lord speak, as he places a crown of righteousness upon his head, and pronounces a final declaration of righteousness upon Paul for all the world to hear. The Lord will reverse Nero’s verdict and declare, “*Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master*” (Mt. 25:21).

- ❖ **Friends, because of the gospel, it’s possible for you to one day receive that same crown and hear those same words.** If you genuinely repent of your sins and trust in Jesus, God unites you to Christ in a real, spiritual union – much like how he unites a husband and wife together as one. And by virtue of our union with him, Jesus’ sacrificial death is counted as the death we should have died AND his righteous life is counted as the life we should have lived.
 - And having been covered by Jesus’ blood and righteousness, God justifies us, he declares us righteousness in his sight and welcomes us into fellowship with him and his Church. That’s our salvation!

- ❖ **Yet as amazing as our salvation *already* is – we are *not yet* complete.** Every true believer groans inwardly as we eagerly wait for the fullness of our salvation, the full redemption of our bodies. We long for Jesus’ appearing.
 - The Apostle John explains why in his first epistle. He writes, “*we know that when [Christ] appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is*” (1 Jn. 3:2). We long for his appearing because then we shall see Jesus face to face, and we shall be like him. We shall be glorified – in a twinkling of an eye – made righteous as he is righteous.
 - That’s what we look forward to when Jesus crowns us with the same crown Paul received.

- ❖ Friends, the Christian life not like a normal race where there is only one crown for one winner. **So the goal is not to beat your fellow runners. The goal is simply to complete the course marked out for you.**
 - And v8 promises this crown of righteousness to all who love Jesus' appearing – all who share a heartfelt longing for his return. Such an attitude is sure evidence that you've been justified. Think about it: No sinner but a justified sinner would long for the righteous judge to return and take his seat on the judgment throne.
 - Friends, if you share this longing, know that the Lord has a crown of righteousness safely stored up waiting for you.

- ❖ Friends, I hope this passage has cleared away some of the fog in your life. I pray that you know have a clearer sight of the shore that lies ahead of you. Keep swimming. Keep fighting. Keep running. Keep keeping the faith.