

**“Ready for Departure”**  
**2 Timothy 4:6-18**  
**December 13, 2009**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

It may seem out of place on this third Sunday of Advent to look at the topic of death. But in the providence of God, that is the topic we come to in this concluding section of Paul’s letter to Timothy. Paul has been withholding some disturbing news until the end of the letter, but can do so no longer. He must tell Timothy that he expects to die soon in his prison cell in Rome.

Though it may seem at first glance to be a poor topic for the third Sunday of Advent, I believe that death is a perfect topic for a sermon preached 12 days before Christmas. The purpose of Jesus’ coming was to release us from the fear of death and help us to be like Paul when we reach the end of our lives. If we are unprepared for death, we are ill-suited for Christmas joy or any other true and lasting joy. Until we are ready to die, we are not ready to live with joy and purpose. The Bible says that Satan uses the fear of death to keep people in bondage their entire lives (Heb. 2:15). John Piper has a helpful illustration of this verse, saying that apart from Christ we are like people thrown out of an airplane without a parachute. During their rapid descent, they will be enslaved to a fear of hitting the ground at a speed sufficient to crush their lives immediately. Someone may try to deal with the rapid approach of the ground through denial, while others may scream to the very end. But in either case, there is an enslavement to fear.

Paul believed the end to be rapidly approaching for him. But Jesus had delivered him from an enslavement to fear. He approached death with confidence and without regret or despair. He finished the way we all want to finish. I would like for us today to consider Paul at the end of his life. If we would end as well as he ended, we need to see the three things he saw in this passage.

**I. Looking Forward with Anticipation**

Paul calls his death a “departure.” This is not the only time he uses this word to describe his death. In Philippians 1:23, he speaks of his own death by saying, **“My desire is to depart and be with Christ.”** It is interesting to note some of the words Paul used for death. In many cases he uses the straightforward language of death and dying. At other times, he uses words like “sleep” (1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4), after the example of Jesus. In another place, he calls death being **“away from the body and at home with the Lord”** (2 Cor. 5:8).

What do we learn about death from Paul’s use of this word “departure” to describe it? There are a couple of things that come to mind. First, death is

transitional in nature, not terminal. When someone departs, they are simply transitioning to another location, not terminating their existence. My wife departed on Thursday for a week in Houston to help care for her father. She simply left one location—our house in Birmingham—for another location—her parents' house in Houston. Death is a change of location, not a termination of existence. As the poet puts it in a wonderful metaphor, life ends as the runway ends. This perspective on death is contrary to the materialistic view that is growing more popular today. This is a view that regards material reality as the only reality. So when the material body dies, there is nothing left to continue. People simply cease to exist at death. But the Bible indicates clearly here that even when the material ceases to exist, there is something left. That brings us to the second truth we learn from Paul's use of this word.

What exactly is it that departs in death? It is obviously not the body, but something more characteristic of us than the body—the soul from the body. Theologians call this the intermediate state because it is located between this current life and the eternal state after God raises our material bodies and reunites them with the soul. The soul doesn't sleep during this period of time. In the Philippians passage quoted earlier, Paul says, **“My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better”** (1:23). To depart is to be with Christ in a far better condition than continued life in our current state.

Paul looks beyond the intermediate state to the eternal state in the words of 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.”** The Day of which he makes reference is the Day of Judgment. This happens following the return of Christ and the reunion of the body and soul at the resurrection. Paul looked forward to receiving a crown of righteousness on that Day. There is a surprisingly large amount of material in the Bible about heavenly rewards. Jesus taught a well-known parable about rewards. It was the parable about a nobleman who traveled to a far country, leaving behind ten servants who were each given one mina to invest for him. When the nobleman returned, he rewarded them in accordance with the return they provided him (Luke 19:11-27). Many other passages, including this one, speak similarly.

How should we think about these rewards? Clearly, we ought not to regard them as some type of payment for services rendered, because that would deny the grace of God. The reward itself comes from the grace of God. This passage is vague as to the exact nature of the reward, but others are more specific. The parable mentioned above speaks of reward like this: **“Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities”** (Lk. 19:17). The reward is to be given more responsibility in serving Jesus. Leon Morris summarizes these rewards like this:

Here and now the man who gives himself wholeheartedly to the service of Christ knows more of the joy of the Lord than the half-hearted. We have no warrant from the New Testament for thinking that it will be otherwise in heaven.

This suggests an important application. If you find serving Christ a burdensome duty, this crown of which Paul spoke is not likely to be much of a reward for you. So one of the ways we can get ready for our own departure is to ask God for a heart that delights in serving him.

## II. Looking Back without Regret

Paul is a refreshing contrast to the experience of so many, who come to the end of their lives filled with regret. Self-centered decisions have been made, and their bitter fruit has been reaped, and there is no opportunity for a do-over. For many people, both in Paul's day as well as our own, regret is focused on living for material gain. Paul had not fallen into such a trap. I am attracted to the simplicity of Paul's possessions. He owned a cloak, which was nothing more than a large blanket with a hole in the middle for the head. But it seemed that a man in Troas by the name of Carpus had need of it, and Paul lent this man his only cloak. Winter was approaching, and he knew he would have need of it, so he asked Timothy to bring it to him. Paul also owned some books and parchments, and he wanted Timothy to bring those as well. But that was about it. His possessions could have been carried in a small bag. But he had no regrets about his material poverty. No one ever does at the end of life.

Regrets are usually focused on relational poverty. Paul looked back on his life without regret because he had given himself to people. As he comes to the end of his life, he gathers around him a small group of associates. For various reasons, only Luke was with him (v. 11). This is the same Luke who had traveled with him and authored the gospel that bears his name and Acts. Now Paul summons Timothy to come as soon as possible and to bring Mark with him. We don't know if Timothy and Mark ever made it. It would have taken several months for Paul's letter to get to Timothy, and then for Timothy to find Mark, collect Paul's cloak and books and travel to Rome. But if they were able to be together, what a gathering that must have been! Together this group authored 16 of the 27 books in our New Testament. Mark is the author of the gospel of Mark. Though Paul had been wronged by many others, he has loyal associates still, and he wants them around him during what he thinks will be his last days. Paul valued relationships.

This passage gives us some insight into several of the factors that led to Paul's deep friendships, and therefore his ability to look back on his life without regret. One is his heart of mercy toward those who had wronged him. He didn't hold grudges against those who had hurt him. This passage is filled with people who had hurt Paul to varying degrees. **“Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm”** (v. 14). We don't know the nature of this harm, but since Paul tended to understate things, for him to describe this damage as “great harm” was significant. But Paul did not seek his revenge, because he was content to leave it in God's hands. **“The Lord will repay him according to his deeds.”** That's not a

prayer for revenge, but a renouncing of seeking vengeance himself. He was content to leave it all in God's hands. Alexander was likely not a follower of Christ. But there are several followers of Christ who had also hurt Paul. **"At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me"** (v. 16). Those Paul had expected to stand with him were some of the Christians in Rome. But it seemed that to stand by Paul was a risky undertaking, and none were willing to take that risk. But Paul doesn't hold their desertion against them, and he doesn't want the Lord to either. So he prays at the end of verse 16, **"May it not be charged against them!"** Paul had plenty of time while in prison to cultivate a heart of bitterness toward those who had let him down. But his thoughts took another direction. He remembered the gospel, the good news that God is for him and not against him because of Christ. That message had such a profound effect upon Paul. So he says in verse 17, **"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."** Paul was remembering the goodness and providence of God in all circumstances, even trying circumstances. Because he was still in prison, he would have an opportunity to share that gospel with some very powerful Gentile rulers, men with whom he would not otherwise have been able to gain an audience.

Another part of Paul's commitment to these friendships is his willingness not to write off Mark as a hopeless case. The Mark who is mentioned here is the same one who had abandoned Paul in Perga during one of Paul's missionary trips. Mark (known by his other name, John, in Acts), had a change of heart later and wanted to accompany Paul and Barnabas on another trip. But Paul was unwilling to allow it, and the ensuing disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over this issue led to the split of their missionary team. But now there has been complete reconciliation, and Paul finds Mark useful.

I notice one other feature of Paul's life here that brings together both his lack of regret and his ability to make loyal friends. He was completely devoted to serving Jesus. All three of these friendships were made in the context of his service to Jesus. Paul didn't set out to make friends, but to serve Jesus. It was in the process of his sacrificial service to the Lord that he came to know Luke, Timothy and Mark. Paul frequently used the language of sacrifice to describe this service, and he does so again here. He says in verse 6 that he is **"being poured out as a drink offering."** This offering was an offering of wine that would be poured out to accompany other offerings. Once liquid is poured out, there is no recovery of it. Paul said his life was that way, being poured out and used up before the Lord. His service of the Lord is likened to a fight and a race. A fight requires concentration and complete effort, while the race has in view the need for perseverance. If he could have lived his life over again, he would have given himself all over again to this kind of service and to these relationships. He had no regrets.

### **III. Looking Inward**

If we would end well, there is one final place we must look, and that is inward. Paul talks about this inward look in verse 8, where he says that all will receive a crown of righteousness who **“have loved his appearing.”** He is talking about the return of Jesus, and says that our attitude toward this return reveals a great deal about us. If we are to be ready to end well, we must have a heart that loves the return of Jesus.

How can we learn to love Jesus’ appearing? When our children were little, we had a family friend who often brought gifts to them. They loved the appearing of their Uncle Scott because of these gifts. We learn to love Jesus’ appearing as we come to value the things that will happen when Jesus appears. Let me mention three things the Bible says will happen when Jesus appears that should cause us to love his appearing. First, Jesus’ control will be fully realized as he defeats all his enemies. There are competing agendas today, and the chief competition for the rule of Jesus’ agenda is the rule of the self-centered agenda. Those who do not love Jesus’ appearing are those who want their agenda to be supreme instead of that of Jesus. Like Adam and Eve, they believe that happiness comes by renouncing God’s reign and calling all the shots themselves. Demas fell into that error. He loved this present world instead of the appearing of Jesus because he found it easier to trust in himself than in God. You can’t love Jesus’ appearing until you learn to trust his control. Do you trust Jesus’ control of your life?

Second, when Jesus appears, his authority will be fully recognized. There are many today who challenge his authority. Not so on that day, when every knee will bow to him, even his enemies. One of the enemies to bow to Jesus is the enemy of death. He will speak a word, and by the power of his word the dead in Christ will be raised. I love his appearing because he will give me an immortal body like his own.

Third, when Jesus appears, his presence will be fully experienced. John words it like this. **“We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is”** (1 John 3:2). That means that our struggle with sin will be over, for we shall be like Christ. You will no longer have to struggle to trust God, love and worship him, and love others. It will be unthinkable and repulsive to us to do anything else.

## **CONCLUSION:**

When Jesus appears, it will be the perfection of his control, authority and presence. We could say all this in one simple way. There are really only two options—we love and trust ourselves, or we love and trust Jesus. May God help us to love and trust the one who has lived for us, died for us and been raised again for us. We can die well when we trust him, saying with Paul, **“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!”** (v. 18).