

## PREPARING FOR DEATH

2 Timothy 4:6-18

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A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson  
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA  
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~~IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.~~

Several years ago an aristocratic English mother was visiting Eton College, one of Great Britain's elite secondary schools - the training ground for statesmen and prime ministers. Disappointed with her son's academic achievements she asked the headmaster condescendingly, "Headmaster! Are you preparing my son for a career in the military?" "No, madam." "Are you, then, preparing my son for a career in industry?" "No madam." "Are you preparing my son for a career in parliament?" "No madam." "Are you preparing my son for a career in the church?" "No, madam." Restraining her growing rage she finally asks, "Headmaster, *in a word*, what are you preparing my son for?" "In a word, madam, *death*." That was not the answer she hoped for - but the headmaster was absolutely right. <sup>He was not being morbid,</sup> The very best education prepares us for death.

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And yet well educated people rarely feel prepared for death. We prepare for academic exams. We prepare for dinner guests. We prepare for retirement. But not for death? And yet people have a deep desire to know how to live so they can die well. In a study cited by Diogenes Allen most people between the ages of 55 and 85 have never discussed the subject of dying with either doctor or minister. Another study shows that most doctors don't want the responsibility of breaking the news to terminally ill patients, yet the same study shows that most dying patients already know they're dying and want to talk about it. Paul Tournier was a medical doctor, a psycho-therapist, and a Christian. During a visit with a terminally ill patient, an inner voice said to Tournier, "Ask him if you can pray with him". Tournier tried to silence the voice because the man had no religious faith. The man had actually expressed all kinds of objections to religious faith. Nevertheless, Tournier asked the man if he could pray with him. He was utterly surprised at the man's response. The dying man reached out to Tournier. "I've wanted so badly for you to pray for

me but I was afraid to ask. I'm not a believer. But will you pray for me? I'm not really prepared to die."

Saint Paul educates us in preparing for death in his second letter to Timothy. What he says is as relevant to teenagers as to octogenarians. Near the end of his letter he looks *forward* to his death and *backward* over his life.

As he looks forward he uses two vivid metaphors that tell us he was prepared to die. First, he says, "I am already being poured out as a libation." The word refers to a cup of wine in a Roman sacrifice poured out to the gods. For example, when the Roman Philosopher Seneca died he said, "I offer this liquid as a libation to Jupiter the Deliverer." Paul saw his approaching death as a libation, an offering, to Christ. It's almost as if Paul is singing, "Take my life, and let it be Consecrated, Lord, to Thee; Take my moments and my days; Let them flow in ceaseless praise." Paul teaches us to prepare for death by offering our life to Christ however old we are.

Paul uses another metaphor to refer to his approaching death. He writes, "the time of my departure has come." He uses a nautical term of untying a ship from its mooring. In other words he says, "It's time for me to sail off into the sunset." Death, for Paul, was like taking a cruise. Kay and I took our first cruise last April. I was filled with joyful anticipation as I saw the huge ropes untied and our ship depart. I knew that romance and adventure were ahead of us. And Paul sees death as an exciting new adventure into uncharted waters. Death, for the Christian is not our destination, but our departure. Loved ones stand waving goodbye on the dock, tears in their eyes because they'll miss us - but we're departing on a great adventure. If we're prepared for death we can say, as our death approaches, "The time for my departure is near."

Paul not only looks forward to his death, he looks back over his life with deep satisfaction because the best preparation for death is a life lived well. Paul uses three athletic metaphors for the life he's lived. First, he uses a boxing metaphor. "I have fought the good fight." Paul took some hard blows in his lifetime. He'd been on the ropes. He'd been down and out but he always managed

to get up. He'd gone the distance. The final bell had rung. The fight was over. Now he can rest. At a funeral we sometimes hear people say, "She put up a good fight." And fight we do. I do not plan to "go gently into that good night." But Christians refuse to believe that death will have the final victory. At a Christian funeral we can sing, "The strife is o'er, the battle done, The victory of life is won; The song of triumph has begun. Alleluia!" I have fought the good fight and won.

Second, as Paul looks back over his life he says, "I have finished the race." Paul sees himself as having already crossed the finish line. I can relate to what Paul says because I use to run track. I vividly remember the best half mile I ever ran and often replay the tape of it in my memory. As I came down the home stretch I heard the students cheering me on in the stands, "Don't let up." I couldn't see them because I was focused on the finish line, but I could hear them. And I firmly believe that people on their death beds can hear us cheering them on as they approach the finish line. As a former runner I can tell you that I'd hate to run a race that had no finish line. I know how sweet it is to pass the finish line - to know I've completed the race whether or not I came in first.

And I'm glad the race of life has limits. If our lives were simply to go on and on, without a finish line, life would become a dreary business. Knowing that there is a finish line makes this life precious. An infinite amount of time, like an infinite amount of money, would be a dangerous thing to have. The finish line teaches young and old to make wise use of the limited time we have. Make every moment count. Thank God, life has a finish line.

As Paul looks back over his life, he uses a third athletic metaphor. "I have kept the faith." Greek athletes took a solemn oath before the games that they'd compete honorably and honestly. Paul at the end of his race affirms that he's kept his commitments. The keeping of commitments has fallen on hard times. Long-range commitment is often replaced by short-range gratification. Nevertheless, most of us long to keep our commitments and bitterly grieve when we fail. We're preparing for death when we make and keep wise commitments - to friends, to family, to nation, to

church - to Christ. And we're preparing for death when we trust God's grace, love and mercy when we fail in our commitments.

Paul uses a fourth athletic metaphor. "From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness." The crown in the Greek games was a laurel wreath awarded to the victor. The crown Paul hoped for was righteousness. Paul hoped that the righteousness, the goodness, he longed for throughout his life would finally be given to him. He would be complete. He would be a good man. One of the truths I learned from reading Dante's Divine Comedy is that God has created us in such a way that we finally get what we have most wanted. If we have wanted wealth, we'll get it. If we have wanted fame, it will be ours. But money and fame without goodness is hell. If we really want to be good people - righteous people - the crown of righteousness will be our reward. We prepare for death whenever we pursue goodness. And when we fail to achieve our own righteousness, we trust that God, through Christ, will give us what we've longed for most throughout life.

In *The Brothers Karamazov* - the greatest novel ever written - Dostoyevsky put his own preparedness for death into the mouth of a dying monk, the saintly Father Zossima. "My life is ending," he said, "but every day that is left me I feel... in touch with a new infinite, unknown, but approaching life, the nearness of which sets my heart quivering with rapture, my mind glowing, and my heart weeping with joy."

Like Saint Paul, Father Zossima, was prepared for death. How about us? Don't wait 'til you're knocking on heaven's door to prepare. Now's the time. Pour out your life serving Christ. Fight the good fight. Don't give up when life disappoints but finish the race. Keep the faith. Let goodness and righteousness be your deepest desire and trust that through Christ, you will receive what your deepest desire.