

2 Timothy 4:6-8 - Passing the baton

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[0 : 00] 2 Timothy 4, verses 6 to 8. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering,! And the time for my departure is near.

! I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, Lord. Great, thank you, Teddy. Do keep that passage open in front of you. We're going to be looking at those three verses together.

And like I mentioned earlier, if you're here for the first time, you're visiting, then we have been working our way through this letter of Paul 2 Timothy. I'm going to start this morning, though, with a story.

It's a true story that has been written for us, recorded for us. So let me read it to you. Heym's entire family was rounded up that afternoon.

[1 : 04] They were bad blood, enemies of the glorious revolution, CIA agents. They were Christians. The family spent a sleepless night comforting one another and praying for each other as they lay, bound together in the dewy grass beneath a stand of friendly trees.

The next morning, the teenage soldiers returned and led them to their place of execution. The place was grim indeed. It bore many gruesome signs of a place of execution.

A sickly smell of death hung in the air. Curious villagers foraged in the scrub nearby, lingering, half hidden, watching the familiar routine as the family were ordered to dig a large grave for themselves. Then, consenting to Heym's request for a moment to prepare themselves for death, father, mother and children, hands linked, knelt together around the gaping pit.

With loud cries to God, Heym began exhorting both the Khmer Rouge and all those looking on from afar to repent and believe in the gospel.

[2 : 21] Then, in panic, one of Heym's young sons leapt to his feet, bolted into the surrounding bush and disappeared. Heym jumped up and with amazing coolness and authority prevailed upon the Khmer Rouge not to pursue the lad, but to allow him to call the boy back.

The knots of onlookers peering around the trees, the Khmer Rouge and the stunned family still kneeling at the graveside, looked on in awe as Heym began calling his son, pleading with him to return and die together with his family.

What comparison, my son, he called out, stealing a few more days of life in the wilderness, a fugitive, wretched and alone, to joining your family here momentarily around this grave, but soon around the throne of God, free forever in paradise.

After a few tense minutes, the bushes parted, and the lad, weeping, walked slowly back to his place, kneeling with the family. Now we're ready to go, said Heym to the Khmer Rouge.

By this time, there was not a soldier standing there who had the heart to raise his hoe to deliver the death blow on the back of these noble heads. Ultimately, it had to be done by the Khmer Rouge commune chief, who had not witnessed these things.

[3 : 45] But few of those watching doubted that as each one of these Christians' bodies toppled silently into the earthen pit, which the victims themselves had prepared, their souls soared heavenward to a place prepared by their Lord.

That was Cambodia in the late 1970s under the brutal reign of Khmer Rouge. And I start there with that story because I think it captures for us what's going on in this passage in 2 Timothy chapter 4. Look down at verse 6, and you'll find that Paul is effectively there, kneeling at his own grave. He says, in a way that sort of echoes Heym, I am being poured out like a drink offering.

The time of my departure is near. Literally, he's saying, My ship is about to sail. It's leaving the harbour. My life is being taken away from me. And then in verse 8, like Heym to his son, he's anticipating a crown of righteousness that will be his. The crown that he pictures is like one of those wreaths or garlands that's given to an Olympic winner.

[4 : 58] It's like the sort of thing that they used to give to Formula One drivers when they won a race, but they don't do it anymore because it covers the sponsors on their race seats. It's like a simple trophy of victory, not valuable in itself, but a mark of justification of past action.

You've made it. A place in eternal glory is yours. You know, Paul here in these verses, although he's facing death, he's in a dungeon, he's not afraid, he's not troubled, he's not anxious. He's calm, assured, and confident. You and I are not in these kind of dramatic conditions, are we? We're not under the condemnation of Nero facing execution like Paul, nor are we in the Khmer Rouge's Cambodia in the 1970s and 80s.

But still the truth is our lives slip away, don't they? Our ship one day will depart. You and I live our lives on the cusp of eternity, probably closer than we think, as life is short, it's uncertain, and very, very unpredictable.

And the way Paul writes these verses here means that what he is saying is that the courage to live like this is not meant to be extraordinary, but it's meant to be ordinary.

[6 : 15] In other words, what Paul is saying to us in these verses is that as his life is like this, so our life can be like this. His courage can be our courage.

That's the whole flow of the section. If you notice, verse 6 starts with the word for, literally because, which means that Paul's confidence in the face of death is the reason for the instruction of verse 5. So if you look up at verse 5, there in verse 5, Timothy is being called to get on with the ministry. The baton has been handed from Paul to Timothy. And Paul is saying, in effect, listen, I'm departing. So Timothy, you do what I did. You live like I lived. You die like I die. Passing on the baton generation to generation.

Because, verse 8, the crown that Paul anticipates is not just for him, but is also for all who have longed for his appearing. Now, I don't know how you feel about all that this morning.

[7 : 16] Let's just take a breath, shall we, for a moment? I don't know how you think about that opening story. It's very moving, isn't it? I think it's hard to imagine not only the courage to kneel there at the side of your own grave, but then to have the courage to call your son back to die with you.

Never mind the courage of the son to come back out of the jungle, to kneel there by the grave. Imagine the courage that Paul has here in a cold, dark, damp dungeon, facing execution, writing one of the New Testament's kind of most warmest, pastorally, theologically rich letters. What presence of mind. What courage. It's all very incredible, isn't it? It's all very otherworldly. Perhaps you're a guest here this morning. Maybe this is the first time you've ever sat in a room and looked at a Bible.

I mean, it's a strange thing to do, isn't it? But we do it every week because we believe this is how God speaks to us. And maybe, you know, maybe if you're honest, you are afraid of death, terrified that when it comes, your courage will fail, that at that point you will realise that everything that you've been living for has just abandoned you and left you behind.

You have no reason for hope or courage kneeling at the gravesite. Well, if that's you, and I think honestly, all of us are there to one degree or another, aren't we?

[8 : 42] Then this passage has something very, very important to teach us, that we might live and die courageously. Now, let me just show you how the passage works and then we'll pull out the meaning for us.

Notice the tenses, right? I know you love English grammar, right? Notice the tense of verse six. It describes the present tense. He is being poured out.

His departure is near. This is what's going on at the moment. Verse eight describes future glory that we've talked about. That's the future. He is waiting for this crown that is in store for him.

And verse seven describes the sort of past or completed actions, the way that Paul has lived his life. And he describes for us in those verses, which we read with the children, that three completed actions.

And it is as Paul in the present looks at those completed actions that he then has confidence for the future. So let's take our time just to look at those actions.

[9 : 36] The first one is this. I have fought the good fight. Now, I hope you notice as we see this that there's an implication in the statement, isn't there? You know, I have fought the good fight means that there are many bad fights that aren't worth having.

Yeah, you know that. Dying grace and courage in the face of what befalls us is not the product of a life lived fighting bad fights, fights with your fists or your words.

Instead, this is fighting the good fight. And we don't have to guess what that is because it's not the first time Paul has taught like this to Timothy. In fact, he's mentioned in 1 Timothy 6 where he's told to fight the good fight of the faith.

It's a good fight that's implied in the picture of the soldier in chapter two, if you remember, who is not to get entangled in civilian affairs in chapter two, verse four. So this then is the fight.

The good fight is the fight to keep trusting Christ. To keep believing that living for Jesus is the best way to live. It's the fight to keep fighting against sin and selfishness and pride and lust and anxiety and anger.

[10 : 47] It's the fight that you have with the temptations of the world. It's the fight to fight the temptation of the allure of money, possessions, comfort, career. It's not the idea.

Don't make a mistake here. It's not the idea that Paul is saying, listen, fighting the good fight is how you become a Christian. He's not saying being a Christian is about our efforts to live for God.

Paul has been so clear on that in the whole of the New Testament. You can't miss this. It is Jesus alone who saves, right? It is the work of Christ in the life of the believer that saves them.

His death in our place. His punishment bearing the pain of our sin before a holy God. But still, that faith, trust and confidence in Jesus that is ours by the Spirit needs to be expressed in a fight for sin. If you turn to Colossians 1, it will come up on the screen so you don't actually have to turn to it. But in Colossians 1, verse 29, Paul uses exactly the same words. And he says this, to this end I strenuously contend.

[11 : 54] It's the same idea. It's the same words. With all the energy that Christ so powerfully works in me. Here's the image there. As the Christian, someone who is trusting in Christ works alone to save them.

The person who's trusting in that, you see that because Christ gives that person energy to fight the fight of faith. The energy that Christ so powerfully works within him.

Christ by the Spirit gives Paul the fuel, but the fight belongs to Paul and he's fighting. Obviously the idea that life is a fight or a struggle is not unique to Christianity, is it?

Lots of great sort of philosophical ideas that circle our world have thought of life being a struggle or a fight. Karl Marx defines life as a struggle of the poor against the rich.

Environmentalists would define life as a struggle of carbon emissions and ocean pollution to kind of put a lid on our impact on the environment. Capitalism defines life as a struggle for success or personal wealth or possessions.

[13 : 03] But notice that in all of those ideas that come to us from the world, really that the struggle is out there and you fight it with resources from in here. Have you noticed that?

So the fight is against a system that keeps you poor and you fight it with your own personal resources. I will stand up for myself. Or the fight is the fight against, you know, not having what you want and you fight it in here with the resources that come here from being the best that I can be.

That's how it works. But Paul says, no, no, no, no, that's not the fight for faith. That's not the good fight. Because the problem in the world is not a problem out there, says Paul.

No, the fight for faith is because the problem is in here. The problem is in our hearts that we don't love God. We don't live for him. We live for ourselves and for our own glory.

We're selfish. We're full of anger and bitterness. And the internal struggle, that's where the battle is located, is fought, says Paul, with external resources that come to us from the spirit.

[14 : 13] So instead of being an external fight with internal resources, it's an internal fight with external resources coming to us by the spirit. It's a fight that we don't fight in our own strength.

We're given the resources by the spirit. And that fight, doesn't it, starts when you become a Christian. And if you've been a Christian for any length of time, you know that it carries on your entire Christian life.

Over the centuries, Christian heresies have basically fallen into two camps. The first one would be called Pelagianism, after a guy called Pelagius.

This is the idea that, really, it's our works that contribute to our salvation. The idea that, you know, the people who get saved in the final analysis are the good people, the people who have worked hard.

It's the heresy of success or of control. It's the idea that we can't be, you know, you can't be so morally bankrupt that salvation has to come to you from externally.

[15:15] Yeah, go through. Sunday school started. Go on. There you go. Pelagianism.

The heresy of success. The idea that it's our works that contribute to our salvation. And so the church or the mosque or the temple sort of lords it over people, don't they?

And they say, if you do this, then we will make sure you get this. If you do this work, we'll make sure you get that salvation. Doing battle with sin and immorality. But they are wrong, aren't they?

Because if fighting the fight is something we do in our own strength to contribute to our own salvation, then when you're kneeling by the grave like Haim was, you will have no courage.

Why will you have no courage? Because you will be thinking, have I done enough? Have I done enough? And you will never be able to say yes.

[16:16] But Paul is teaching something different here, isn't he? He's saying, listen, that the fight, the good fight against sin and immorality, that is done in the strength of the Lord. Not to contribute to my salvation, but as an expression of it.

So as I kneel beside the grave, I go, do you know, the fact that I was even fighting sin at all is evidence of Christ's work in me. The fact that I wanted to fight sin is because he gave me the courage to do it.

So that facing the sailing ship, the departure of his life, kneeling in front of his grave, Paul can say, I fought the good fight. The other heresy is called antinomianism, which literally means against law, nomos.

It's the idea that what we do doesn't matter. This is the idea of Western liberalism, right? It doesn't, you know, that if God exists, his job is forgiving stuff, right? So he's full of grace and mercy.

It doesn't matter what you live, you know, what you do. You know, this is the sort of heresy that captures churches when they say that the experience of the saved is mostly just about rest, letting go and letting God.

[17:25] You know, it's the idea that says, if I let go enough, if I have the right spiritual experiences, if I go to the right churches, if I listen to the right music, if I attend the right kind of silent retreats, or if I have the latest kind of ecstatic spiritual experience, if I read the right books, then in those moments, God will do the work for me and it won't really be a battle anymore.

I don't really have to think about that. That's not Paul's language here, is it? His language is the language of sweat, blood, tears, fighting.

He says in 1 Corinthians 9 verse 26, when he picks up the same kind of idea, he says, I don't fight like a boxer beating the air. If you go and walk your dog in Queens Park in the morning like I do, people are boxing the air there, aren't they?

That's what they're doing. They're trying to get fit. That's not Paul. He's fighting a real fight. I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I preach to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

I'm fighting. I'm fighting. Perhaps I can say this by way of application. My experience is that this fight of the good fight is ferocious.

[18:39] It's painful. That holding on to Jesus, that trusting him, that fighting sin is harder than I would ever have imagined and it doesn't get any easier. It troubles me, and maybe this is what happens as you get older.

It troubles me, I think, when I see younger Christians who don't seem to appreciate this about the Christian life. They run from experience to experience thinking that that will fix them as a Christian. Making scant use of the means of grace because we seem to live with this assumption that the Christian life is a life of rest, not a life of war. That if there's work to be done in the Christian life, God will do it for me and I won't have to pick up a tool or a weapon.

And Paul says, no, fight like a soldier because when the end draws near, and it will draw near, we will see in the fight the fruit of Christ's work in us. Secondly, I've finished the race.

In the Greek here, there's not really much of a distinction between the language of a race and a fight. In fact, the soldier language could have been used of someone also competing. But I think what Paul is doing here is riffing off his earlier illustration in chapter two where he says this, similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules.

[20 : 02] The idea here then is the idea that there is a marked out course that Paul has been set to run. Paul at his conversion is told by the Lord that he will have to suffer and preach to the Gentiles.

You know, God had work for Paul to do. He'd laid it out in front of him. And now at the end of his life, he's saying, I ran that race. I did that work that you had called me to, Lord. I didn't swerve from it.

I don't know if you've heard of a guy called Rob Sloan. Rob Sloan was an athlete from the Sunderland Harriers. And he was down to compete in what was called Britain's most beautiful marathon around Northumberland's Kielder Forest.

And he finished in a remarkable time of two hours, 51 minutes, third place, cross-country marathon up and down hills. Not bad for an amateur athlete.

In fact, incredible. So incredible that some of his fellow athletes became a bit suspicious. They realised that they had not seen him at several checkpoints towards the end. And despite his initial denials, it came to light that Rob had hopped on a bus at mile 20 and then just ran in for the last mile to claim his third spot.

[21 : 13] He'd cheated. And the medal was taken off him. Now that's the sort of negative contrast, isn't it, to Paul here. Paul says, I didn't get on the bus. I stuck to the race that was marked out for me.

God had good works for me to do. I followed his lead. I've done what he asked of me. Now it's possible for us to get confused here. We're straying into the territory, aren't we, of sort of divine guidance.

How do we know what God wants us to do with our lives? And I think for some Christians, this has been understood, the idea that God has this sort of mysterious, hidden, individual, specific will for my life.

And my job down here is to try and guess what God wants me to do, listening perhaps to some sort of still small voice in my head telling me what to do next. But that's not really how Paul is describing running the race here.

Really how he describes receiving divine guidance. You see, can't you, how that would rob you of courage in the face of death if that's what life is about. You'd be kneeling there going, did I do the right thing?

[22 : 17] Did I take the right job? Did I marry the right person? Did I live in the right place? Actually though, the question in the New Testament is much simpler and deeper than that. Paul assumes here that our lives are guided by God's sovereign plan.

That's not a plan that we have to guess. It's a plan that he's sovereign over. The route is given by him. So what matters most is our motives. That running the race is about wanting to please God. The question of divine guidance in 2 Timothy is something like this, right? Do I want to live my life to please the Lord? Do you want to live my life to please myself?

Which one do I want? What is the guiding motive of my life? Pleasing Jesus or pleasing myself? It's why it's possible, isn't it? It's a much deeper question.

It's a harder question in some ways to answer. It's a simpler but harder. It's why it's possible, isn't it, to be a godless, self-seeking pastor or missionary who is not really obeying the Lord or a fully devoted, God-pleasing Christian in full-time secular employment because the course is titled Live for God's Glory.

[23 : 25] That's how it's titled. Not so much just, you know, I'll follow me if you want to, but eagerly desire to follow me in everything. Can I say to you this morning, here's a diagnostic for you.

If you're wondering where you are with all of this, whether you are really a Christian or not, if as you look into your heart, you see no desire to live for God's glory, if there's no desire to find joy and purpose and satisfaction and meaning in living for God and his glory and not your own, can I say to you as gently and as clearly as I can, if you don't find that desire in you, you're not a Christian. You're not a Christian. A Christian is not someone who does something perfectly all the time. That is not true. The Christians in the room here know their sin and they repent of their sin regularly.

We do it together as a church for that reason, right? But a Christian is someone whose deepest desire is to live for God and his glory, not them and their own. They say, listen, I know I do this falteringly and failingly, but Lord, I want to please you, not myself.

I want you to take the glory and the honour, not me. I want to follow where you would lead me and not just go where I want. We're running the race, anticipating the crown.

[24 : 46] And the presence of that desire and the way that has shaped our lives is a sign of the Lord's work in us. I once had a trainee up in Liverpool and he was in his early 20s and he was from Surrey, right?

Surrey's lovely. And so he moved to Liverpool to work with us in a church there. And one afternoon he said to me, in a quite troubled way, he said, there's no reason for me to be here other than the gospel.

And he was really troubled by that. It's like, why have I come so far north? Why have I left leafy Surrey for urban Liverpool? If the gospel's not true, it makes no sense.

And I said to him, listen, I've got great news for you. The gospel is true. And so it's right, isn't it? If you can see that your life has been shaped by the gospel, if you can see that it is the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ, risen, ascended and returning one day, that it is that news that is shaping your present action, then you can have great confidence, can't you?

You're running the race. You're running the race. Thirdly and finally, I've kept the faith. I've kept the faith. Here, it's not so much the idea that Paul has kept trusting in Christ himself.

[26 : 09] He has done that. That's the soldier image that we were thinking about. Rather, I think the point here is that he is handed on to Timothy. He has, he is, I've kept the faith. I've preserved it.

I've looked after it. I've guarded the gospel and I'm now handing it on. I'm entrusting it to Timothy. I'm passing it on to reliable people who will be qualified to teach others. I've resisted the false teachers.

I've gently instructed opponents. I've had nothing to do with foolish arguments. All those things that we've been finding in 2 Timothy. I'm going to take you back to Liverpool again.

But when I was a pastor of a church in the city centre there about 20 years ago, the location of the church meant that the leadership and really the congregation was made up of predominantly young people, young adults, young couples, graduates, students.

It wasn't exclusively that. We had a few older members who made a massive contribution to the life of the church. But I remember once going to visit an older couple who'd been attending the church for some time but had decided that they were going to leave and go somewhere else.

[27 : 14] And my job was to go and sit with them and to chat with them in their home about why they decided that now was the time to leave and go somewhere else. And as we chatted, we chatted through a number of different things.

But then they came really at the end of the conversation to their real reason. You know people do that, don't they? You have a conversation with them and the thing that you really wanted to talk about only comes out at the end. Anyway, so that's what happened.

And they said something like this. They said, listen, we just can't imagine being in a church where the pastor and the leaders are younger than us.

That's what they said. Now I've thought about that conversation quite a lot since and I've thought of lots of wonderful things I should have said. But at the moment, I don't think I really said anything very helpful at all. I was just dumbstruck.

You know, if you can't imagine being led and pastored by people who are younger than you, you condemn yourself not to keep the faith, don't you?

[28 : 11] You know, if you can't imagine being in a church that is pastored and led by younger people, then you are saying, I am not going to pass this on to anybody else who will be qualified to teach.

If we can't be involved in a church that we don't lead or we can't be spiritually cared for by people who are less mature than us, not maybe simply just in age, but perhaps in wisdom as well.

If we can't imagine that, then we won't keep the faith and we won't die well. You know, Paul doesn't say here that he's kept the faith because he's sure that Timothy likes the same music that he does. He doesn't think that Timothy wears the same sandal brand. He doesn't even think that Timothy is the finished article and that Timothy won't make any mistakes, even mistakes that Paul might not make himself if he'd kept hold of it.

No, he says, I've kept the faith because he knows that Timothy knows the gospel. He knows that the truth has been preserved. His job has been done. Let me try and be really practical about this. [29 : 12] We have got to, as a church, and I think this has been a failing of churches down the years, not just the church here, but many churches, we have got to let young people lead.

Not just any young people, but young people who know the gospel, young people who are theologically thoughtful, they've read the scriptures, they've been taught them, they know how to handle God's word, they know its doctrines clearly, they've shown maturity and wisdom, they are biblically qualified to lead, but we hand the baton on to them.

And as we do that, we need to be good at rejoicing more that the gospel is going forward than it is going forward in the way that maybe we would have done it. Because here's the truth of it.

Church is not about you. It's not about me. It's not about the young people. Church is about Jesus. It's his church. And it's a church for every generation until Christ returns.

And our job here is to steward the ministry for the very short time that we have it and then hand it on to others who will be suitably qualified. I'm really sad that I never got to meet Doris.

[30 : 24] Many of you in this room did get to meet Doris, but for those of you who don't know who she was, she was the member of the church who when she died, left a legacy to the church that enabled us to appoint a pastor and purchase the freehold of this building.

Now, I didn't know her. So I don't know whether Doris would like everything about church today. She might not like the burgers or the bouncy castle, perhaps. I don't know. But let me say, I can say with great confidence that she kept the faith because her gift has been used by God to keep these doors open.

And you and I this morning, in some sense, stand on her shoulders, don't we? So I want to ask you, what about you this morning? Where are you in this baton passing on job?

Now, maybe you find yourself this morning, you're a younger person, and you're thinking there, yeah, brilliant, Steve, stick it to the old people, right? Let me say, if you're thinking that, please repent of that right away. But maybe as a younger person this morning, perhaps you're reluctant to pick up the baton.

Perhaps you see in some of the older saints the commitment that it's required of them down through the years. Perhaps you realize, watching them and seeing what they've done, that actually to carry the baton will take from you some of the things that you might love to do instead.

[31 : 50] It might mean me staying when I want to leave or leaving when I want to stay. You see that it will make you poorer financially, probably, as you pick up the financial responsibility of handing the baton on.

It will make you time poorer as you give yourself to the work of the gospel. But do it. We have a responsibility, don't we, to hand on the baton.

It's the hardest thing ever to get young Christian people to give up their Friday evening to teach younger children the gospel. Why is that? We have a baton to hand on to them.

It's the most important thing that we do. We want to kneel in front of the grave with a sense that we have kept the faith. So pick the baton up. Or maybe you're an older Christian this morning.

How do you feel about passing the baton on? About mentoring someone to follow in the work that you've been doing? Are you reluctant? Perhaps you fear that things might not be done in the way that you wanted them to be done.

[32 : 49] Well, let me urge you to keep the faith because the time is coming. It might not be that far away for some of us in the room when, like Paul, our ship will sail. And courage to meet Jesus in the future as we anticipate the loss of our lives in the present come from looking back and saying, I fought the fight, the good fight.

Not the bad fight, the good fight. I finished the race. I kept the faith. Don Cormack, who recorded that story that we started with in his book, Killing Fields, Living Fields, tells how the courage of Haim and his family and others like them, basically the news of that made it into the refugee camps which were springing up in Thailand as people were leaving Cambodia.

And many people who were fleeing were not Christians. And the news of the courage of the Christians arrived at the refugee camps in Thailand and people began to respond to the gospel as they realized that these Christians had something that they didn't have.

I wonder, maybe that's you this morning. Perhaps the courage that Paul has here, that Haim had, that Timothy has, that your Christian friend who brought you this morning has, perhaps that's

enough to make you think, do you know what?

I want that. I need that. I need something in my life that will be solid and certain and last beyond the grave.

[34 : 15] Let me tell you that Jesus is the only one. Come to him. Don't delay. Trust in Christ. Fight the good fight.

Run the race. And keep the faith. And then for you too, there will be in store a crown of righteousness. Let me pray as I close. Let's just take a moment of quiet just to reflect and pray in our own hearts.

Heavenly Father, we want to pray that you might give us all the resources that we need to fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith.

Thank you for your goodness to us in the Lord Jesus. Help us this morning to be an encouragement and a blessing to one another. In Jesus' name, amen.