

“I Have Fought the Good Fight”

✦ Reserved (vv.6-8)

✦ Rescued (vv.16-18)

In the name of Jesus, our Savior, Companion and righteous Judge, dear fellow prisoners of hope:

One of life’s greatest challenges is not knowing what lies ahead. But what if you could live life backwards. Then if you were in your first race as a fifth grader you’d know it was bad advice for someone to say, “You know if you eat a candy bar before your race, you’ll have a burst of energy.” Living life backwards, you’d say, “No, that extra sugar will turn your legs to rubber so you can’t run.”

One of life’s greatest blessings as a Christian is that we do get to live life backwards through faithful believers like the Apostle Paul in this farewell to Pastor Timothy. Maybe you’re upset for losing out on a house, only to find out God has a mansion for you instead. Maybe you’re falling for the pastor / congregational lie that *bigger is always better*. Look back at Jesus leaving the crowds behind and Paul all alone in prison. **“I Have Fought the Good Fight.”** His hope blooms on heaven’s glories ahead...

✦ Reserved (vv.6-8)

Paul sees himself *“already being poured out like a drink offering.”*¹ Imagine the offering checks and dollars on the altar, set on fire with fine wine poured over to burn too. Is Paul looking forward to his death? **“The time of my departure has come.”** He always said, **“For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”** (Philippians 1:21) Looking back, **“I Have Fought the Good Fight”** – against doubt and fear. Against worry and fatigue, **“I have finished the race.”** Not against gladiators you could see, but against Satan trying to strip him of confidence in God’s promises, **“I have kept the faith.”**

He’s knee-deep in Roman sewage, underground in the Mamertine Prison – no windows, no doors, just one hole high above where soldiers lowered him into the dungeon. No bathrooms; it was like living in the toilet. Is Paul ashamed? No, **“from now on, there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness.”** How could he hope for that? He used to be Saul of Tarsus, persecuting Christians to their death. Didn’t Paul deserve Emperor Nero blaming him with other Christians like Peter for the fire Nero started to make room for his building projects? Where is Paul getting this *righteousness*? In a *crown* yet too?

You know this if God has led you like Paul to, **“Christ Jesus [who] came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.”** (1 Timothy 1:15) Kneel at the cross of Christ with all your sins. God washed them away with the blood of His own Son. “But, Pastor, you don’t know what I’ve done, how far I’ve wandered away for God.” Are your sins greater than God’s mercy? Look up and see Jesus crucified between two criminals. One admits he deserves to die and asks Jesus, **“Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** What does Jesus say? **“Today you will be with me in paradise.”** (Luke 23:42f)

Here's what Jesus says is **Reserved** for you. And in case you might still be tempted to doubt, Jesus says this through His own prisoner, suffering for this powerful message of God’s love in Christ. That’s Paul’s crime, his only crime! Preaching the message of God’s love in Christ for all. **“From now on, there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness. The Lord, the righteous Judge, will give it to me on that day, and not only to me but also to everyone who loved his appearing.”** Once *the righteous Judge* would have terrified us all. Now God’s *righteousness* is yours by faith in Jesus. Trust Jesus as your Savior and rest assured: God cannot punish you again for guilt that’s gone, finished, paid in full.

¹ EHV ~ Evangelical Heritage Version (<http://wartburgproject.org>) © 2019. NPH: 800-662-6022, Amazon-Kindle, LOGOS.

Have you **“loved his appearing”**? Since childhood singing Christmas carols of Jesus’ birth? Eager to see **his appearing** in the Epiphany season, which means *appearing* or *shining forth* in glory as God? You’ve **loved his appearing** after Easter in those forty days of proof until His glorious ascension. You still **love his appearing** that’s coming. God keeps telling you that you belong to Him. First in your baptism when that Word-powered water washed your sins away because God said so to Paul. (Acts 22:16) You’ve **loved his appearing** in Sunday School lessons – first as a child, then as a Sunday School teacher. You **loved his appearing** in Catechism so that your faith could finally be confirmed to receive His Holy Supper. By faith in that miraculous meal you have **loved his appearing** in, with and under the bread and wine – a foretaste of the heavenly banquet we will enjoy at his final **appearing** on Judgment Day.

The smoke from wildfires again this summer can remind all of us that God has promised global burning on the Last Day. Then ***the elements will melt with fervent heat, the earth and everything in it will be burned up.*** (2 Peter 3:10-12) Then it will be clear that the ***nations [have indeed] exhausted themselves for nothing.*** (Habakkuk 2:13) Then it will be clear that Paul is absolutely right as he’s looking back on his life...and ahead to his final hours: ***“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*** (Romans 8:18 NIV84) Paul’s certain hope is to be...

✠ Rescued (vv.16-18)

How could judges in Roman courtrooms stand the stench of prisoners from the Mamertine? Outside with plenty of ventilation? But Paul looked around at his first hearing and says, ***“No one came to my defense, everyone deserted me.”*** Is he bitter and upset? No, Paul can remember how kind Jesus has been to forgive him and says, ***“May it not be counted against them.”*** How can you and I hold grudges if we remember God’s great mercy washed away our guilt for Jesus’ sake?

You’re never alone at home, at school, or in prison as long as you remember that Christ-crucified is also Christ-risen from the dead. He stands by you to strengthen and uphold you in every weakness of body and soul. From sins of passion where your heart just won’t let go – **Rescued!** From sins of worry where you just can’t seem to shake your anxiety and trust God the way you know you should – **Rescued!** Even from sins long ago, sins of youth, sins of abortion, sins of drugs, sins you don’t even want to remember were done to you – **Rescued!**

Look back on life with Paul and listen: ***“But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion’s mouth.”*** There’s the purpose of our life continuing right there. God wants to use your mouth and mine to keep sounding out this **message** of sins-forgiven, heaven won, salvation done – all for Jesus’ sake. ***All the Gentiles***, non-Jews, God will use to make Jesus’ fellow Jews envious. (Romans 11:11-15) Others are enjoying God’s grace in their Messiah. God wants His chosen people to come back to Him through Jesus too. In Christ, Jews and Gentiles have already been **Rescued!**

One fear expressed in our member meetings, Catching Up after COVID, is what enemies of Christ are planning for God’s people. Paul could not know when he wrote this that his fellow Apostle Peter, if this tradition is true, would also be martyred on the same day. They could not know how Christians would be tortured to death, terrified by dogs, crucified and burned like candles along the streets. If he had known, would he consider all a loss? Not while fighting **the Good Fight of Faith** as he wrote years earlier to the Christians in Rome: ***“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** (Romans 8:37–39 NIV84) Focused on Christ, each of us can say with Paul, ***“The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.”*** Looking back from heaven, no one will have to tell us to praise the Lord. We’ll keep shouting with saints and angels: ***“To [God] be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”***