

PAUL SUMMARIZES HIS ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER

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For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:6-7).

The final words spoken by anyone are seldom forgotten. They are important, for they express the last thoughts of a person about to leave this world. For example, during my stay in Canada, my mother went to be with the Lord. I had been away a long time and had tried to persuade her to join me. She was scared of airplanes, but finally agreed to come. Unfortunately, sickness spoiled her plans. She wrote a letter explaining she had to undergo surgery, but promised to come immediately after her hospital stay terminated. She wrote: "If the plane goes down, I shall be with your dad; if it does not, I shall be with you, but in any case I shall meet you in the morning!"

The same truth applied to Paul, the brave missionary who evangelized the world and introduced innumerable people to the Savior. It would have been nice had he written an autobiography, for the book would have enthralled millions of readers. However, his motto seemed to have been "not I but Christ." He expressed a lifetime in three majestic verses, and a simple epitaph will reflect excellence throughout eternity. It supplied six word pictures of exceptional beauty.

A Sacrifice... Prepared

For I am now ready to be offered.

It is interesting that Paul said, "I am ready to be offered." He was ready to lay down his life for the Lord he adored. He did not say he was ready to die! He used different terminology—he was ready and willing to be sacrificed, to make his final commitment. The sacrifices offered in the temple were without blemish. They were completely for Jehovah, and never returned to service. Evidently Paul had reached such a place in his own life, and he was eagerly anticipating

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entering into the presence of his Savior. The apostle realized he was about to become a martyr, but thoughts of an imminent decease never disturbed the tranquillity of his soul; his vision was focused on meeting Christ.

Paul had been present when the first martyr went home to heaven and had not forgotten that experience. He heard Stephen saying: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (see Acts 7:56). The apostle could not forget how he had become a recipient of God's grace. The young Christian had prayed for his murderers, saying, "Lord lay not this sin to their charge." All through life he had remembered that prayer and finally felt worthy to follow Stephen into the presence of Christ. He was to become a sacrifice of praise.

A Sailor... Preparing

The time of my departure is at hand.

Paul knew his sojourn on earth was ending; his ship was soon to sail for another country! The Greek word translated

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"departure" is analuseo, which suggests two things. The verb luseo means to loose or liberate, to set free. The prefix ana suggests the beginning of a journey. To use the language of a seaman, his anchor was being raised; his voyage would soon

begin. Earlier in his ministry Paul indicated to the Philippians that he had a desire to go immediately to heaven but realized it was necessary to strengthen the church and bring them closer to Christ (see Phil. 1:23-24). That desire had been fulfilled, and there remained no valid reason why his departure should be delayed. He had already claimed to be a citizen of heaven, and he joyfully anticipated his homegoing (see Phil. 3:20). He had no luggage, for the journey would soon be completed. One moment he would be absent from the body and the next, present with the Lord! All that was needed for eternity awaited his arrival.

Earth had lost its great attraction;
Heaven alone could satisfy:

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He was going home to Heaven
Where he knew he'd never die.

A Soldier... Persevering
I have fought a good fight.

Paul's life had been difficult; he had enlisted in God's army and had never run from danger. Many of the early followers of the Savior had left their Leader, and even a few of his own associates had gone away. He wrote: "Only Luke is with me" (see 2 Tim. 4:11). The apostle had continued his conflict, and although the scars of battle remained, he was about to receive a commendation from his Commander-in-Chief.

The apostle mentioned three enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Christians are sometimes awed by the magnitude of Paul's achievements and forget that he was like other people. When he wrote to the Christians in Rome, he said, "For I know that in me, (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Rom. 7:18-19). There were occasions when unholy thoughts entered his mind, but when this happened, the apostle leaned heavily upon the everlasting arms of God's kindness. The enemy was relentless, but Paul triumphed because he resisted the wiles of the devil. It was remarkable that at the end of his career, this brave warrior for Christ could say: "I have fought a good fight."

A Sportsman... Prevailing
I have finished my course.

When this great leader spoke of finishing his course, he might have been thinking about the Olympic Games for which many athletes prepared throughout their lifetime. The writer to the Hebrews compared the Christian life with the experiences of Jesus. He wrote: "Let us run with patience the race

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that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down on the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:1-2). The Savior had also been running a difficult race, but had triumphed gloriously. He never became a dropout. Probably the light of heaven was already shining upon Paul's face when he wrote: "I have finished my course." He had reached the winning post, and was already approaching the royal throne where the King of Kings was waiting to offer His congratulations.

As Paul reminisced, he remembered when adversity almost overwhelmed his spirit, and he had been beaten to his knees. He summed up his experiences by saying: "In labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft, of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep: In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness; in watchings often, in hunger and thirst. in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:23-28). Had the apostle been asked

to explain his success, he would have replied: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (see Phil. 4:13).

A Security Guard... Protecting
I have kept the faith.

The apostle had been entrusted with a jewel of incalculable worth. The Gospel of God's redeeming grace had to be guarded carefully. Jewish teachers and Gentile unbelievers would sacrifice everything they possessed to destroy the good news of salvation. Their efforts had to be resisted constantly. Some important officials had said Paul was mentally unbalanced, and his message was false. Yet through everything, he remained

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true to his commission; he never changed. The message had been a stumbling block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Greeks. He had been an object of scorn to many of the intellectuals of his generation. As Dr. Frederich Schleiermacher, the eminent German theologian, said: "Nothing changes the fact that Paul's theology was that of a converted man." Evidently, he believed if Christ could transform a persecutor into a preacher, there was no man beyond the reach of the grace of God. The apostle was so convinced his Gospel was the only Gospel, he issued the greatest denunciation of all other doctrines. In this modern age, Paul would have been an unpopular evangelist. Writing to the Galatians he said: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). Paul would have appreciated the words of Sir John Bowring:

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Tow'ring o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

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Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.

A Sovereign's Delight... Proclaimed
Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness,
which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day:
and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his ap-
pearing (2 Tim. 4:8).

Paul knew what it meant to stand before councils, magis-
trates, kings and queens. Unafraid, he had been questioned by
skilled attorneys and had been paraded before people of great
eminence. Now he was confronted by his greatest experience.
When Governor Wallace of Alabama was asked by a news

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reporter what had been the outstanding moment of his life. he
replied: "It has not yet come. The greatest time in my life will
come when I meet my Savior face to face." Paul would have
applauded that answer.

Maybe he tried to visualize the time when he would again
meet the Prince of Peace. The writer to the Hebrews, after
mentioning many Old Testament characters, said: "Seeing we
are encompassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses

The Living Bible supplies an interesting translation of that
text. "Since we have such a huge crowd of men of faith watch-
ing us from the grandstands." Perhaps Paul anticipated the
moment when multitudes of angels and redeemed saints would
cheer as he approached God's throne to receive his reward.
His soul would be elated as the Lord offered His congratula-
tions and placed a crown of righteousness upon his head. He
would have appreciated the old hymn:

When all my labors and trials are o'er,
And I am safe on that beautiful shore,
Just to be near the dear Lord I adore,
Will through the ages be glory for me.

Oh, that will be glory for me, glory for me.
When by His grace I shall look on His face,
That will be glory, be glory for me.

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