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FAREWELL TO ARMS: The Parting Words of an old Warrior

RUSSELL F. BLOWERS

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

“I am ready to die for my Lord, that in my blood the Church may obtain liberty and peace.” Becket, murdered Archbishop of Canterbury

“Now comes the mystery.” Henry Ward Beecher

“Aye, Jesus.” King Charles V of France

“I am not the least afraid to die.” Charles Darwin

“It is very beautiful over there.” Thomas Alva Edison

“All my possessions for a moment of time.” Queen Elizabeth I

“Turn up the lights; I don’t want to go home in the dark.” O. Henry

“This is the end, for me the beginning of life.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. 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 me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing”—Paul, in his triumphant farewell shortly before his execution in Rome (2 Tim 4.6-8)

PAUL: PORTRAIT OF A MAN IN MOTION

This is my favorite text for ministry because it is not the feeble lament of an apostle who has had enough. It is not a letter of resignation. It is not informing the Lord God that he is retiring. This is an acclamation of joy and hope by a man who continues to press on toward the upward call in Christ Jesus. It is not a song of stoic admission of mere mortality. It is the sonorous lyric of a slave of Christ who wants to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings. Paul is not signing off and cutting out. He is planning on a tough winter—“bring the winter coat I left at Troas.”

He knows, like Bonhoeffer, that the guards will be coming for him very soon. And he knows that Phygelus, Hermogenes, Demas, and others have deserted him. “But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength,” Paul says. It is no wonder that any servant of Christ who has known the agonies and the ecstasies of ministry drinks in this text and its context like a thirsty deer.

This is the portrait of a man in motion. He doesn’t see himself as an incarcerated victim. Despite his chains, he dictates pastoral letters to Timothy, not as another piece of his legacy. He writes to make sure he hands off the gospel to Timothy whom he has mentored, informed, encouraged, and warned. “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing and His kingdom, I give you this charge: ‘Preach the Word!’” Don’t think for a moment that this old warrior has laid down his arms yet—“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world... We demolish arguments and every pretension

that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor 10.3-5). Paul is delighted to continue using the sword of the Spirit, even while in prison.

Now why would I select these verses as my favorite text? Maybe it is because I am eighty years old. I am a member in good standing of an exclusive club no one can join anymore. Every day 1000 World War II veterans die in America, many of them Christians transferring their membership to the "church above." I am an octogenarian, and folk in this superannuated category are usually reluctant to take out a thirty-year mortgage. I like this text because Paul, who at his coronation was much younger than I but considered up in years, is not whining about why God would let him die just when the Christian movement is about to explode all over the Mediterranean world. He is not sitting around waiting to die, playing shuffleboard on the sunny coast of Caesarea. He is not intimidated by the prospects of being beheaded by the Praetorian guard. His words about departure are not a dirge, not a requiem. They are heart and mind expressions of realism (even apostles die, and the time has come), of affirmation ("I have fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith"), and a clear last will and testament ("preach the Word...be prepared...keep your head...endure hardship...keep the message alive...focus on being God's person in frenetic times").

PAUL MENTORS TIMOTHY

I am enamored by this text because it reminds me there is no retirement in the New Testament. The Levites were mandated to retire at fifty, but Paul and the great saints of the new covenant died with their boots (sandals) on. Being eighty doesn't automatically confer infallibility. It does, however, furnish one with considerable experience in the trenches. Second Timothy is written by someone with scars preparing a young disciple for the rigors of preaching Christ to a pre-modern world. And Timothy is listening and learning. He knows he won't have Paul around much longer, and he wants to soak up the riches of his advice and teaching. There is a model in here for the younger minister of the gospel. Listen to the elderly, even if the advice is unsolicited. There is much to learn from a brother or sister who has been there, done that, and knows how to navigate the white water of ministry and sail through with the joy of Jesus.

Second Timothy is Paul's last epistle. It is a handbook for apprenticed preachers, warning, loving, reassuring, challenging, reminding. He tells Timothy to catch the torch. Carry it well as a point person for Christ. Point persons in Vietnam were the people who went ahead of the platoon, checking for booby traps and enemy troops. Then they would call for the rest to follow them. Paul had spent many years serving as a point person in Asia Minor, going on ahead and preaching the gospel of salvation and planting churches in enemy territory. His letters that we call the pastorals are addressed to Timothy and Titus, and to legions of unnamed disciples who would become the replacements for the first generation of preachers and teachers. Paul is their father. They are his beloved children in the Lord.

Paul admonishes and encourages them, keeping Dr. Luke busy recording what turns out to be scripture for all of us latter day soldiers of the cross. He alerts them to the terrible times of godlessness that will come and of the apostasy that will lead people to shop around for teachers who say what they want to hear. Things will go from bad to worse (2 Tim 3.13), and he coaches Timothy on the power and usefulness of all God-breathed scripture (2 Tim 3.16). Paul is not about to leave him with no visible means of support. Timothy will wear this parchment out reading and heeding it. As its primary voice in the first few decades, Paul is readying the church for his approaching absence. He is handing off the baton to a new and younger runner.

A PERSONAL ASIDE

My long ministry with one congregation was not one glorious succession of brilliant vision-casting, ingenious leadership, and auspicious decisions. One failure is still the source of regret and repentance for me. When the time came for me to transition into "retirement" I had not brought beside me someone like Timothy who could ease into the leadership of preaching. I had an excellent staff, but I failed to suggest that the elders call a young minister capable of continuity in ministry. As a consequence, the church struggled to

find God's person over a several-year period. But the elders (to whom Paul gave high honor) steadied the ship and prayerfully prevented the disjunction of a great congregation.

Paul did it right. When the key person was no longer available, Timothy moved in to fill the sandals of Paul. He did so not as an apostle, but as a follower of Christ who was no longer timid, but filled with the spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline. It is still a mystery how I could have read that story of the transfer of responsibility to another many times, and still have failed to implement it.

PAUL'S INTEGRITY

I cherish this text because of the integrity of the remarkable person who wrote it. I'm quite aware of the persistent claim by many prominent scholars that the pastorals were not written by Paul, but by someone who took his notes and ideas, pieced them together, and signed Paul's name. They insist this was a practice in those early times that was commonplace and acceptable. But I am convinced that only Paul could have written Second Timothy. It is so personal and passionate and it pulsates with a heart consumed by Christ Jesus. It is written by a herald, an apostle, and a teacher (2 Tim 1.11) who treasured Timothy as a son. "Purity of heart is to will one thing" said Kierkegaard. By that definition Paul was pure as the snows of Hermon. His singleness of heart is threaded through all his letters, and is most pronounced in this inspired swan song.

PAUL'S HEART AND SOUL

This text and its context are precious to me because they lay bare the ability of a giant intellect to speak so that Timothy and I can understand the truth he expounds. In the pastorals we see the heart and soul of a man who starts his professional career as a member of the Jewish mafia out to rid the land of the people of the Way. As we read second Timothy we hear from one who has been "in Christ" for years. He has been revered and opposed, beaten, persecuted, abandoned, and struck down in a daily death. He knows he has the treasure of the gospel in a jar of clay, so that whatever his accomplishments, the power is from God and not inherent in him and his associates. Now the fight is almost over; his struggle with Gnosticism and demonic activity is won. He has run the course of his life, the race, so as to win an imperishable crown of life. He has kept the faith without wavering, keeping it and giving it away to a gentile world. He has finished well. And now his immediate goal in the twilight of his life is to see Jesus and be with Him. He has left a legacy of faith under fire, hope against all odds, and love, which is the best of all three graces. His Roman letter, his magnum opus, has changed the world. A thirty-two-year-old pagan genius named Augustine impulsively read Romans 13 and was converted. A Roman Catholic monk named Luther, who taught theology in Wittenberg, read Romans 1.17 and detonated the Reformation of the 16th century. One May evening in 1738 John Wesley, an Anglican priest unsure of his standing with God, felt his heart strangely warmed while listening to somebody reading from Luther's preface to Romans. In 1918, Karl Barth wrote his exposition of Romans and was personally and theologically transformed. And all of us who believe understand that we are children of a greater God because of the literary output of a Jew who became captive to the Lord Jesus Christ.

With the martyrdom of Paul after a second Roman imprisonment, the Word spread and the church expanded. Luke had closed his journal of the early church with Paul living in his own house in Rome, receiving visitors, still fighting unbelief with the weapon of persuasion, still running fast before time ran out, still keeping the faith of Christ without compromise, and still anticipating immanent execution. After two years of this, imperial Rome's tolerance ended and Paul was eliminated. Acts 28 was closed. Acts 29 began and is still being written by individuals who, like Timothy, take the charge of an old cross-bearing apostle: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction..."

PERSONAL REFLECTION

In the early years of my wife's Alzheimer's disease, she asked me one day: "what if the time comes when I don't even know you?" And I answered, "Well, I'll know you, and I'll be here for you." I suspect that people asked Paul: "What will happen to the church when you go to be with the Lord? Who will carry on the Christian movement?" I can imagine Paul reminding them of the words of the Head of the Body: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to very end of the age" (Matt 28.19-20). Jesus was with Paul as he fought the good fight, as he ran the course, as he defended the faith. And after Paul's funeral, the Lord was with Timothy, Titus, Peter, John, Priscilla, Aquila, Silas, Phoebe, Mark, and James. And He is with us as we declare and demonstrate the gospel, as we fight on, run for the prize, keep faith, and see in the distance a gleaming crown of glory.

Russell F. Blowers preached at the East 91st Street Christian Church of Indianapolis for forty-five years until his retirement in 1996.

