

The Greatest Victory

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History abounds in its records of great achievements and victories of human celebrities. None excels the triumph of Paul, the apostle, described by himself on the eve of his "departure."

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing." (2 Tim. 4:7, 8)

"I have fought the good fight." Men have fought for liberty, to satisfy selfish ambitions for conquest, to accumulate wealth and its attending power, and for other causes more or less great. Some have attained fame as heroes while others reaped a reward of infamy. Paul fought. He is not much of a man who will not. The kingdom of God is not a drilling ground for pacifists. It is organized for conquest. "The good fight" of Paul is the best sort of fight and challenges a most careful examination. The weapons of that warfare clearly exhibit the character of it. "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh (for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but mighty before God to the casting down of strongholds); casting down imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ; and being in readiness to avenge all disobedience, when your obedience shall be made full." (2 Cor. 10:3-6) The fight must be carried on by those of like mind with Paul as long as the imaginations, thoughts and plans of men mark out paths of disobedience to Christ, the Lord.

Paul was a fighter before he was a good fighter. He once thought that he "ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" and he carried on a terrific warfare against the truth while in his darkened understanding he thought it to be heresy. His "good fight" began with his conversion and ended only when his head went rolling in the dust in glorious martyrdom. He was stern in his defense and advocacy of the truth. He was even hard on himself and uncompromising in his demands that his own life conform to the ideals he was battling for. "I therefore so run, as not uncertainly; so fight I, as not beating the air: but I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage: lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected." (1 Cor. 9:26, 27) Many men have the energy, courage and will that fighting demands and they use it in a way that is disastrous to themselves and others. A human jellyfish may do no more harm than waste good food and encumber space that could be more profitably used, but a fighter is either doing a lot of good or a tremendous amount of harm. It is contrary to his nature to be neutral. A good fight demands a stout heart directed by clear thinking and true ideals to guide it. Paul had an objective; he was going somewhere. "Brethren, I

count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:13, 14) "Stretching forward" and "pressing on" point out the enormous energy the apostle employed in his upward movement toward his goal. He encountered many obstacles and his victory in overcoming them made it "the good fight."

"I have finished the course." He ran a great race and the pattern of it is found in his own words: "Therefore let us also...lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith." (Heb. 12:1, 2) The zeal of the apostle was so fiery that his enemies considered him mad and possibly some of his well-wishers thought him a fanatic. The taste of victory was sweet to such an ardent spirit and he glowed in triumph over a finished course. The way was dark and storms were gathering on one occasion when he was enroute to Jerusalem. It was much like Daniel going into the den of lions. Undaunted, he said to a group of friends: "But I hold not my life of any account as dear unto myself, so that I may accomplish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God." (Acts 20:24) That course was now finished, his gospel ministry had been long, rich and faithful without the spot of compromise or surrender, and he was ready to meet the Lord unafraid and unashamed. It was the warrior's true reward!

"I have kept the faith." This faith was the gospel that Paul preached which came to him by revelation of Jesus Christ. There were many and powerful influences at work to modify the faith. Judaism, Paganism and the perennial appeals of the flesh stubbornly resisted a full surrender to the stern demands of the faith. These strong influences are still seen in much that is called Christianity. Paul's zeal for the faith burned hotly at Antioch when he resisted the encroachments of a strong Jewish clique among the brethren "that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. Much of Paul's writing and preaching was designed to build a strong line of defense against tidal waves of influences which were subversive of the gospel. There was passion in the plea he made to Timothy. "O Timothy, guard that which is committed unto thee, turning away from the profane babblings and oppositions of the knowledge which is falsely so called; which some professing have erred concerning the faith." (I Tim. 6:20, 21) The faith is a divine trust. It must be kept. It must be guarded. It is something precious. "Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints." (Jude 3) The plea often made today that it makes little difference what one believes "just so he is honest in it" is pitiful when compared with the apostle's zeal for the faith. Had Paul turned aside from the faith to the advocacy of speculations and opinions, he could not have said: "I have kept the faith." Some make shipwreck of it, some compromise it, while others ignore it for "knowledge which is falsely so called." He who can at the end of his life says truthfully: "I have kept the faith" shares the supreme triumph that Paul gloried in.

"Henceforth." The years that were spent in keeping the faith were few and soon gone. The "henceforth" stretches out through eternity. Men are concerned about the now and exercise a fatal apathy regarding what will follow "henceforth." The word "crown" is

impressive here. It will be given "to all them that have loved his appearing." An earthly crown is a symbol of wealth, power and rule. The heavenly crown stands for the eternal exaltation of the redeemed who shall live forever in the presence of the Lord and share his likeness and his glory. It is the passport to all that heaven is and has to offer to them whom the Lord bought with a price. It was real to Paul and unreal today only to those who are not keeping the faith.

"That day" is "the day of the Lord," the day when the Lord will come, raise the dead and judge the world. There will be a "henceforth" for all. It will be glory for all who have fought for and kept the faith. It will be otherwise for myriads who have turned aside for fables, sold out for a mess of pottage, or in other ways have shown their contempt for the faith.