

## "FAITHFUL TO THE END"

TEXT: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" II Timothy 4:7

### INTRODUCTION

We have here one of the most familiar texts in all the Bible. These are words that sum up so well the life and ministry of Paul, the Apostle.

As we get older we come to see how important it is to hold on - to persevere, to see things through. What Paul is saying here is simply this: he did not quit. Such a sentiment is hardly ever dramatic or spectacular. The world, it seems, is always more impressed with sudden brilliance or isolated acts of genius than with steadiness and faithfulness of performance. But finally most things do come down to fighting the fight, finishing the race, keeping the faith. The Bible puts a very high estimate on people who did not quit. Who was it who said, "The quitters never win, and the winners never quit".

Now these words of Paul are words that speak to all of us. There is not one of us who has not faced the temptation to run away. Sometimes we have yielded and sometimes we have not. As we look back, I think we can say that those moments when we stayed with the job are the ones we remember with increasing appreciation.

### LIFE IS THE LONG PULL

Suppose we begin by reminding ourselves once again that life is a matter of the long pull. Paul used the figures of the arena and the race. Many a person is good at running dashes, but straining forward toward the goal when exhausted is another matter.

A civilization is not attained by a single decisive battle or a brief sudden effort. Civilization is a matter of the long pull and of millions of unknown, faithful people consolidating the gains that have been made and preserving them. Or take the matter of building a nation. I think we have a tendency to pick out a few crucial events in the birth of a nation as if it could all be summed up in a few happenings which are dwelt upon every 4th of July. But if one reads American history carefully, one discovers that the battles had to be fought on the outskirts as well as at the center of the struggle. Read again the story of George Rogers Clark and the suffering which he and his men endured on the Mississippi. Not every battle is remembered and not every expedition is included in the history books. Nations have their roots in the patience and perseverance of many men and women of whom it can be said, "They did not quit".

Any good cause will have an appeal to many persons who certainly prefer goodness to evil. If the engagement is going to be a short one, any number of people will enlist. But great causes are never easily attained, and the short terms are of very little value when it comes to the final victory. Even preachers come in for criticism on this score. A person who has been active in community reforms all his life told me some time ago that it was easy to get preachers to sit on the platform when the program was launched, but those who will stay with it to the end and do the wearing day-to-day work are few!

The point is this: the world is full of dramatic starters, but not so full of faithful finishers. Any minister knows laymen who are good for a quick shot in the arm for any Christian enterprise. But if the church is involved in any long-term task or enterprise, then it's a different matter. Such men are much tougher to come by. Many of us are willing to lend our names to a good cause, or willing to have our names appear on a committee listing, but to give faithful service until the task is finished is not so common. Most of us looking back over our lives can pick out certain instances when we started great and good things but never saw them through.

Lord Kelvin was one of the great scientists of his time. In the latter part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, he contributed to thermodynamics and to the understanding and use of electricity. He received honors from several universities and from the government for his achievement. A statue was erected to him in Glasgow in 1913, and yet on one occasion he said this:

"One word characterizes the most strenuous of the efforts for the advancement of science that I have made perseveringly during fifty-five years: that word is failure"

Which is to say that his success came out of perseverance, or if we may put it the negative way: he succeeded because he did not quit.

THIS TEMPTATION TO QUIT Now if we may look at the other side of the coin, we may simply say that one of our continuing temptations is to quit. Life is so constructed that we are constantly under this pressure. So often we start out with great enthusiasm and then at some point we suddenly discover that things are more complicated than we realized and discouragement and difficulty confront us. We feel tempted to give it all up and move off to something else. At such times when we are tempted we need to remember this that enthusiasm and vitality that are not undergirded with some good old stubbornness are not really worth very much.

What is more wonderful than a young man and woman beginning their marriage adventure? They are so much in love and nothing is impossible for the two of them together. Not for them will the experience go sour, and they never doubt for a moment that they will achieve something that never happened before. Yet, the statistics tell a sad story of how many of these confident beginnings end up in the divorce court. For them there comes a day when there are a hundred reasons why they should quit over against one reason why they should persevere.

Ask a young person what he or she is going to do upon graduation and the completion of their schooling and you receive a description of a job or a profession offered with bright and shining, eager and enthusiastic eyes. And yet, so many who have started out bravely and eagerly on a high road end up losing their way and settling for their third or fourth choice. There may be many good reasons for it, but finally does it not come down to the task demanding a patience and perseverance that they did not possess.

No one who has lived very long finds it in his heart to blame people who quit. Yes, there are always many good reasons why it happened. We might have the courage to continue if we could be sure of ultimate success. Ah, but there's the rub. There comes a day when the whole matter seems to be in doubt and the outcome trembles in the balance. We can't be sure that the end of the road will have what we're seeking; we can't be sure that the continued sacrifice will produce victory. We only know that we grope in darkness for hopes which seem to grow dimmer as we approach them. In the darkness of doubt, we quit. We give up fighting.

Some years ago when Adlai Stevenson was defeated for the presidency, I remember that late at night on Television he appeared to concede his defeat and offered a few words to those who had worked so hard for him. It was a hard time for him, but the words he quoted described an experience that many men have had to face. Said Stevenson, "I'm too old to cry and it hurts too much to laugh". Most of us will go through periods such as this not once, but many times. We are ashamed to cry and to laugh demands more than we have. No wonder that so many people give up the fight, drop out of the race and lose their faith.

WE NEED HELP

Now this situation brings us to this point: we need help. As long as we keep this in mind there is hope for us. It's when a person believes he can define the issues all by himself and come to his own conclusions that he is in real danger. We need Someone to make us aware of duty which, as the poet said, is the stern voice of God. We are in great need of a strength not our own to persevere in the midst of daily difficulties and disappointments of living.

To me this is one of the great opportunities of the church. We need a fellowship of concerned persons to encourage us and we need to be reminded constantly of our moral and spiritual obligations. The church, when it is truly the redeeming fellowship that it ought to be, keeps us close to the source of our power and makes us aware of the distant goals. As alcoholics often find redemption through a group, so every Christian needs the fellowship of people who are aware of the unseen forces of God.

Francis P. Chisholm one time put down as Chisholm's first law of human interaction, "If anything can go wrong, it will". Then he said there was a corollary of that law which read, "If anything just can't go wrong, it will anyway". Most of us have experienced this truth, and we have lived enough to know that there is not much hope for us in our own strength. We must have help beyond ourselves.

OUR HOPE - IN THE GOSPEL

The final word to be said is that our hope rests in the promises of the Gospel. What Paul found we can find, and sometimes the only thing that saves us a willingness to wait a little longer for God to act.

We must learn to live one day at a time. This is Jesus' teaching which becomes more realistic with every new experience that comes to us. If we look too far ahead, we shall then be tempted to seek some new way out. But if we can get through today, there will be fresh strength for tomorrow.

At the same time, it is amazing how many of the difficulties which loom so large as we look far ahead, never materialize. God is always visiting us with divine surprises and miraculously eliminating some of the obstacles in our way. If I can finish the day, tomorrow will have some fresh light which will illuminate the dark picture.

It is good news that he who walks in Christ's way is kept faithful to the end of the fight. We do not walk alone and in that desperate moment when we begin to define a hundred reasons why we should desert, we can hold out a little longer if we can see the great resources of power he has given us. Christians through the years have testified that they are upheld by unseen sources of strength. While there are very few St. Paul's among us, there are thousands who can testify that the same power which saved Paul, saved them.

I visited a religious kibutz in Israel in the Spring of 1954. I remember meeting there a young Jewish man and his wife who described what they had been through since the founding of the cooperative several years before. They had gone through the War of Independence together, and they had lived without water except what could be brought in from miles away. They lived for months in dirt and hunger. But now it looked so different. Crops were planted and orchards were growing. Roads were black topped to keep down the dust and a beautiful new synagogue was being built. These were people who had come to that desert from cultural centers in Europe and who had been forced to endure suffering and privation. But they had not quit. They had built something so wonderful that one could see in them the Jewish people at their best. In them was the embodiment of what we think of when we think of Paul and his heroic perseverance. And I realized that in the 20th century as well as in the 1st century, God gives his children perseverance, patience and

Paul...

courage in times of suffering and hardship. With Christ, we will fight the good fight, finish the race and keep the faith.

LET US PRAY Our lives are not always easy, O God, and we ask for strength to meet the difficult things that the days may bring to us. Open our eyes to the shining things that lie ahead of us. Help us to put the past behind us, and pour all of our energies into the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes always steadfastly on Him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Amen