

I Have Kept the Faith 2022
 Acts 5:27-35. 38-41 2 Tim. 4:1-2. 5-8

Acts 5:27-35, 38-41 (New Revised Standard Version)

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, “Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” They were convinced by him, and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.

2 Timothy 4:1-2, 5-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully. As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

In the late 1880’s, Rev. Russell Crowell preached a sermon
 that became a popular lecture and then a book published in 1890, called,
 “Acres of Diamonds – Success in Life — Getting on in the World.”

In his book, chapter by chapter he discusses various professions,
 and in chapter 9 he advises pastors, priests and ministers,

“The responsibility is upon the preacher to make his congregation rich ... he must teach them to live successfully in this world ... how in a business way to take care of themselves and theirs as would make most of them wealthy.”

Certainly a life of integrity, faithfulness, honesty and hard work
 should reap some benefit even in this world beset with corruption.
 But God never promised and is not at all obligated
 to make our lives in this world easy or prosperous,
 just because we are faithful, religious and obedient,

or simply because we are Christian and follow Jesus.

God is not some sort of high in the sky vending machine
into which we deposit our good works, faithfulness and godliness,
and out comes blessings, happiness, abundance & prosperity,
along with immunity from trial, trouble and tribulation.

My experience is that committed faithful living and obedience
are not generally the easiest most comfortable path in life,
but are most often at odds against our culture and this world,
and that Christians are not somehow immune or exempt
from problems, difficulty, suffering & disappointment...
...& sometimes Christians are called to take a courageous stand anyway.

It is clear even with a superficial reading of the Book of Acts
that though faithful and committed to Jesus Christ,
the early Christians suffered harsh persecution and struggle.

In our passage from Acts 5, the same Peter who fearfully failed
and denied even knowing Jesus 3 times on the night of his arrest
has become the fearless spokesmen for the followers of the Lord,
leading them in faithful obedience, and being obstinate in
opposing the religious leaders' attempts to silence them.

These same religious leaders had already demonstrated their power
and their willingness to use it, in having Jesus brutally killed.

They threatened and locked up the apostles, hoping to silence them,
but when angels freed them from prison, instead of fleeing,
they immediately returned to preaching at the Temple,
and our text today picks up when they were arrested again, vs. 27-29

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority.

It's ironic they complain, you are determined to bring this man's blood on us
when at the trial of Jesus before Pilate they said, Matthew 27:25-26

"His blood be on us and on our children!" So Pilate released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

The apostles were confident, yes, God could and might deliver us,
but delivered or not, we will not yield, **we must and will obey God.**
Our being faithful before God does not assure us,
that we won't struggle and suffer in this world...
... nevertheless, we must obey God rather than human authority.

Early on, Dietrich Bonhoeffer also grappled with a similar issue.
He said several times that he was a pacifist opposed to any violence,
but couldn't sit by and just watch without actively resisting
against the growing evil & terror of the Nazis under Hitler,
the destruction of nations at war and the Jewish Holocaust.

He was a loyal German who loved his country, and wrote in his diary:
that "He could not abandon his country to her fate ... the very convictions that always made him a man of peace led him into the violent resistance to evil... searching for a way to discover and obey the will of God in the moral cesspool of Nazi Germany... daring to do what is right."

Bonhoeffer used the metaphor of a runaway car, that as a pastor,
he could do more than bind the wounds of the victims or bury the dead; he must throw himself in front of the car and bring it to a halt... “putting a spoke in the wheel of an unjust regime.”

Bonhoeffer became involved in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler,
noting, “the question of ethics is seldom clear-cut, that men are rarely faced with a straight choice between good and evil... In the end a man may have to sacrifice his reason, his conscience, and all his preconceived ideas of what is right if he is to keep faith with God... If we claim to be Christian, there is no room for expedience. Hitler is Anti-Christ. Therefore we must go on with our work to eliminate him, whether successful or not.”

The prison doctor who observed Bonhoeffer’s execution wrote,

“I was most deeply moved by the way this man was praying so devoutly and fervently to his God, and so sure that God heard him. At the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. In the almost fifty years I worked as a doctor, I hardly ever saw a man so submissive to the will of God.”

Clearly Bonhoeffer was **confident that he’d kept the faith,**
that though they’d attempted to kill, **it was the right thing to do.**

Several months into my first call after leaving seminary
I returned for some study leave in the seminary library
to plan the texts I’d use for the next season of sermons.

While there I set up some meetings with a few favorite professors,
many of whom would be retiring in the next few months or years.

Our conversations were different now that I was a pastor.
I was looking for practical and theological reflection
about real life situations I was experiencing in ministry.

For the seminary professors, I think their impending retirement
was also creating an additional sense of urgency and focus,
knowing that their opportunity to shape, train, teach,
and influence new pastors would be coming to an end.

Our conversations were clearly focused on what they considered
to be the most important truths of their experience and expertise...
... the lessons most critical to my future ministry as a pastor...

... urging me, don’t let other voices break your focus or seduce you,
or dull your sense of hearing the Holy Spirit’s presence,
or stray from the clear meaning and truth of Scripture.

You must be attentive to God.

The 2nd Timothy passage today has a similar sense of urgency & focus
as Paul hopes to guide young Timothy along his pastoral journey.

The Apostle is nearing the end of his life and ministry,
probably in prison, and he wants to pass along to Timothy
the best of what long experience & ministry have taught him,
to guide & prepare Timothy for the challenges & rigors ahead.

So, what would be that last and most important lesson?

Paul explains what he knows to be most important, vs. 6-7

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, **I have kept the faith.**

These are not words of sorrow or regret.

There's no sense of fear or dread, bitterness or loss.

Paul has given it his faithful best, his all,
and in the end he can accept & live with what he has done,
his successes and failures, both the good and the bad.

Looking back over his life, his accomplishments and ministry,
he's not troubled by his situation or afraid,
for he's been faithful and served with integrity...

...and in the end, may we too have faithfully lived and served well.

Do you hear the power & hope of Paul's integrity, vs. 7 ----

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.

It is from that perspective that Paul explains his final lesson
seeking to encourage Timothy to live out his own sense of call.

Paul has known him since he was a boy as his friend and mentor,
and his focus is a final goodbye, his best and last advice. vs. 1-2, 5

... I solemnly urge you: **proclaim the message**; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable;
convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ... As for you, always be sober, endure
suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

So what is this message that we too are being called to proclaim?

**It is the truth of God's grace in Jesus Christ,
the Good News that all are invited into a real and
transforming relationship of grace and assurance,
hope for healing the broken, God's love, joy and peace,
reconciliation and all the other promises of Scripture.**

And how are we to proclaim this message?

by thought, our motivations and attitudes submitted to God,
from the inside, that will guide all that we say and do.

by word, by all that we say, all submitted to the Lordship of God,
that our words declare grace, hope, joy and mercy in Christ.

by deed, by all that we do along this journey of faith we are on,
everything we do all under the reign and rule of God.

For Christians, every aspect of life is part of our journey of faith,
and at any moment, we are moving toward God's will and purpose,

or we are moving further away.

The difference between faithful Christians and those who are not,
is not in the difficulty or the severity of challenges we face,
but it's our assurance and trust that God is with us,
and that God will bring about good, even from disaster.

The incredible truth of God's abiding love that is always with us,
is what we are called, to live, reflect and proclaim to our world...
so that as Paul wrote, vs. 7

I have kept the faith. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race.
In the end, that is what really matters.

The passage of time is the ultimate value-test of many things.
Quality & truth are proven by how something holds up to the end.

I've never heard from any I've sat with nearing the end of their life,

"I wish I'd worked more hours so I could have earned more money,
or could have afforded a bigger house, nicer car, more expensive vacation...
...none of that has seemed important at the end of their life's journey.

Time is the great sifter, sorting, separating,
and revealing what is truth, by what really lasts.
That is the same "time test for truth – the test for God's will"
proposed by Gamaliel to the council of leaders in Jerusalem.

If, these 'Christians' are false and spreading lies,
then in time their ideas, their movement will fail,
and their teaching will not stand up to the truth-test of time.

Applying this wisdom, **Gamaliel wants to observe before reacting.**
1st, because ultimately God will resolve the issue in his own time,

2nd, Gamaliel raises another possibility, that they could be wrong.

3rd, and even worse, vs. 3

but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting
against God!"

Our loving Creator blesses us and gives us these mortal lives
so that our trust, understanding, and faith **can grow deeper**
as the Holy Spirit inspires, teaches, guides & transforms us...
... because we are destined to be with and to enjoy God forever.

Our goal is that when we look back over the life we've lived,
the truths, goals and values by which we lived, we can say:
**No regrets, I walked with God along the journey given me,
I enjoyed, I learned, I grew and I made a difference,
my life and living glorifies the One who created me.**

So am I living this life God gave me in the best possible way?

With Paul, (vs. 7)

when the time of my departure does come, I want to be able to say:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is
reserved for me the crown of righteousness.

And so that Jesus will say, (Matthew 25:21)

"Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things; enter into the joy of
your master."