

It is the last Sunday of the year. I don't know about you, but I tend to think a lot about the year just ending. This has been a tough year in many ways. I personally have had other years when on December 31st I said, "Whew! Glad that's over with! Next year will be better." Those were years of losing loved ones, or painful ordeals, or just a lot of being over busy.

I'm thinking what is it that matters at the end of the year? What have we done with the year?

Someday we will ask ourselves, what was important about my life? What did I do that was worthwhile. When I look back on my years, what will make me feel satisfied? What will make me wish I could do it again?

In this passage Paul was saying his goodbyes. He had finished his race.

6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand.

Paul was in Rome when he wrote this. Though Bible scholars differ somewhat on when this was written, most place it just shortly before Paul's death. Paul had been given a prophecy about his time in Rome. He knew that he was going to go there and die. Perhaps the Holy Spirit had made him know that his time to give his life was near.

But he wasn't afraid or dreading it. He counted it an honor to die for Christ. He also said in the letter to the Philippians that he was looking forward to leaving this life to be with Christ.

Philippians 1:21-23 "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell.

For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better."

Mainly, notice what he says in the last part, in verse 23. He said he was hard pressed between living and dying. He wanted to depart and be with Christ. He said that is far better than being here. Hmm, do you feel that?

We have a saying in English, "Out of sight, out of mind." It means you don't think much about what you don't see nearby, or people you don't see nearby. We humans live in this physical world that you can see and touch. But at the same time, we are spiritual beings. There is more to us than these bodies and the chemical responses that take place. There is the spiritual side. But because we can't see it with our regular senses, we sometimes forget about the spiritual side. Of the two realms, the unseen spiritual realm is the one that is eternal.

There is nothing better than being with Christ. My favorite verse of the song Amazing Grace goes like this. "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun. We'll have no less days to sing his praise than when we first begun!" eternity, wow! Shining as the sun, wow! Singing praise to God, wow!

Paul said that he was being poured out as a drink offering. Everything he was, everything he had, he gave up for God. The cup was empty.

The departure was near. When you hear departure what do you think of? A lot of you probably think of going somewhere by airplane. How many hours have you sat near the departure gate, waiting to board?

I had a memorable departure once. It was about this time of year, 8 years ago. On the day we were celebrating Christmas as a family I got a call from my brother in America. He said that I had better hurry back to Indiana if I wanted to see my father again. The doctor wasn't sure if he would even make it until New Years Day. He had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, which had already spread to his liver. I made it back in time to see him. We spent several days together. But I remember saying goodbye. I had to get back to Japan, or so I thought. As I departed from the hospital, with him sitting there in the

wheelchair watching me go, I knew that it was the last time on this earth that I would see him. He made his departure about a week later on January 12th.

He was happy to be departing. He was 87 years old. He'd walked as a Christian most of his life. He was kind of a humble man, yet very sincere. He had wondered if God was calling him into full time ministry, but it didn't seem to be. Instead he served God daily by his walk and his talk. He glorified God in the shop where he worked. He helped at church with Sunday school, and men's meetings. And he followed Paul's words in Ephesians 6:4, love your children and bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

My father could look back on his life and feel satisfied. He told me more than once, though, "Your mother and I aren't perfect parents but we always prayed for you that God would make up for our mistakes." I'll agree, he wasn't perfect, but who is? However, he tried to follow the Bible in all his affairs. We can do no better than that.

In verse 7 it says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

You will find the metaphor for the Christian life of fighting the good fight, and running the race in other places in the Bible. You don't find too many metaphors for the Christian life about sipping pina colodas on the beach though. You don't find too many metaphors about laying around in the spa. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying there is anything wrong with spas or beaches. What I am saying is that as Christians we have joy in many things now, but ours is also a struggle.

It is a long process of persevering. It takes courage. It takes strength and dedication. We have the victory in Christ, but we still have to run the race and fight the good fight. Satan and his demonic helpers want to see us beaten down. They want to see us living in defeat and depression. Do you suppose Paul wrestled with feelings of defeat? Did Paul have to work to keep the faith? Was it a challenge to him?

You may be thinking, nah, no way. This is Paul. God used him to write about half of the books of the New Testament. Umm, problems of keeping the faith?

Do you remember how he became a Christian? He was miraculously struck down by Jesus. He was made blind for three days. He prayed and fasted and God sent a prophet to him to pray for him. His eyes were healed and he started to follow Jesus. With a start like that, how could you ever be tempted or swayed?

He was taken into heaven and he heard things which were too glorious to tell. (2 Corinthians 12:2-4) If anyone was a super Christian, it had to be Paul.

Could he ever doubt? Sounds like it. He said it was a fight, a race to keep the faith. In other words he had to contend and struggle. If he could doubt, so can any Christian. If you have ever doubted, did you feel guilty, thinking, "is something wrong with me?" Don't feel that way.

1 Peter 5:8-10 "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you."

It says in 1 Peter that the same kind of thing comes to all the believers. But resist the devil steadfast in faith! In verse 9 it says that you should know that the same kinds of sufferings are experienced by all Christians in the world. Hang in there! Endure it! And God will use it to strengthen you, perfect you, and make you strong.

Keep the faith! Don't give up! One of my favorite movie scenes is from Lord of the Rings last movie, "The Return of the King." Most of the movie is about people not giving up against incredible odds. The armies of the wicked ruler Sauron seem overwhelming. They are hard to kill, they are mostly monsters and there are way more of them than there are of the good guys. There is one hope for the good guys

and this is two little men, Frodo and Sam. Their part of the movie is also struggle, struggle, struggle. It is almost painful to watch. Near the end they complete their mission. Frodo is weak from lack of food and water. He has just had a life and death struggle with little creature name Gollum. Now he is hanging off a cliff over a chasm flowing with lava. He is gripping the edge with the fingertips of one hand. His other hand is bleeding because Gollum bit off one of his fingers. He is ready to give up and his friend Sam leans over the edge and says, "Don't you let go. Don't let go!" Frodo looks like he can't quite make it, then Sam gets hold of him and pulls him up. Days later they are all cleaned up, the grime washed off, and fresh clothes on. The new king of the land is coronated and everyone is celebrating. Then the king walks over to the little men. They bow in honor to him. But the king and all the people honor the little men. They are little and their strength is not much, but they persevere, and are praised by the king for it.

Such a reversal! From struggling to live and hang on, to being honored as a great one in the kingdom. Our struggles in faith here and the reward of heaven are a little bit like that. Only much much better! Hang in there! Don't let go. Don't give up. Fight the good fight. Run the race. Keep the faith.

verse 8 "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing."

The crown mentioned here is not a royal crown, like a king wears. It is the victors crown. It is like in the Roman sporting contests, the victor would wear a crown of leaves. Only this crown is not a crown of leaves, but one that will last.

I have sometimes felt that it would be selfish to think about being a Christian for a reward. And it would be, if that was all you were doing. We are in Christ because of his love for us. We love him because He first loved us. Without Christ we are spiritually lost and dying. He comes and rescues us. It is a wonderful thing to be changed from a dying person into a new born. But that is what the Bible says happens to us in Christ.

But what new born just lays around as a new born? They grow. They play and learn. They eventually become adults. And they work.

David Guzik says, "Some feel that Paul was too focused on rewards and that it isn't proper for Christians to think much about the reward they will receive in heaven. Yet God has no problem motivating us with heavenly reward. It will be worth it. We must hang in there now. We will be rewarded."

Note also in this verse who the crown is for. It is for Paul and for all who have loved the appearing of Jesus. This means the first appearing when He came to redeem us, and also the second appearing when He comes to take us home, either from living on this earth or from the grave where the dust and ashes of our bodies wait.

I must give two warnings in connection with this. One is don't be over concerned with how much reward we receive in heaven. The point is not to get caught up in how big the crown will be. Will it be bigger than other people's, or will you be embarrassed by it's smallness. The point is to live well for God. Live in faith. Live in love. Run the race that God has put before YOU.

The other point is not to get this confused with being saved. You don't earn God's grace. You don't do good things so God will like you. God loves you because He's God. When you come to Jesus and ask him to take away your sin and guilt, He does. Not because you deserve to have it taken away, but because He loves you and if you come humbly to him, He will forgive you. That is what it means to be born again. That is the foundation of the Christian life.

1 Corinthians 3:11-15 makes this pretty clear. **"For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it**

endures, he will receive a reward.

If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."

The foundation is Jesus Christ. You can't build without the foundation. There is no benefit of good works without trusting in Jesus. But if you are a Christian, you have the foundation and you build on that foundation with good works. And these verses make it clear that there are different ways to build, gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay and straw. It will be tested with fire. What remains will be your eternal treasure. What is burned up is gone.

What are the good works? The key thing in answering this is your relationship with God. Live in the Holy Spirit. If you are a Christian the Holy Spirit is in you. As you grow in your relationship with him you bear fruit of the Spirit. That fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. You can try to do it on your own. But that is hard, if not impossible.

The real fruit of the Spirit comes by His work in you. To build your relationship with him, read the Bible and meditate on what it teaches, every day. Pray to God, tell him what is on your heart and mind. Praise and thank him for what He has done for you. Thank him for taking you to heaven when this life is over. Confess your sins. When you blow up at your kid, ask God for forgiveness (and your kid). When you have bad thoughts of hate or bitterness, ask God for forgiveness and to help you think good thoughts. When you get proud, ask God for forgiveness and to help you think in the right way. Pray for your needs. Pray for others needs. Do this every day.

Then be willing to make changes in your life. If you sense God leading you to stop doing something that you do, pray for strength from him to stop it, and then commit to stopping. Or if there is something you sense him leading you to do, do it.

Living in this way, you will find joy. And in the end you will find a reward in heaven. And the crown you get? Ultimately it is for him. You will cast it down as an offering, as a gift to him.

Rev. 4:10-11 "the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created."

He is worthy. If you are a Christian He has made you his child. Run the race. Win the prize. See the love shining in your Father's eyes.