

Prayer

In the midst of this wonderful day, Lord Jesus, breathe new life into every part of what I do, how I live, what I think and how I speak. May Your presence inspire me, Your power enthral me, Your love amaze me, and Your vision excite me; and may Your peace at the end of this day encourage me that everything is part of Your greater plan for me, for those I love and for all Creation. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Rural Life

Pray for those who have to task of monitoring and protecting the rural life around us in protected national parks and also on private ground. Pray for respect for God's creation.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for the security of the seas and the problem of piracy*
- *Pray for little children who are abused by their parents*
- *Give thanks to God for the many good things He has given you*

Meditation

You take me by a harder path, Lord God, and lead me through it all,
So I may find the value of trusting in your guidance.

You speak to me a tougher word, Lord God, and make me face my demons,
So I may receive the benefit of Your free deliverance.

You grasp me with a firmer hand, Lord God, and ensure I feel Your power,
So I may know the real source of spiritual strength.

You show me an unyielding vision, Lord God, and test all my reactions,
So I may never shirk the truth, nor compromise the Gospel.

You place me in thicker forest, Lord God, of troubles, mine and others,
So I may learn to follow You, when others fade away.

And through it all, Lord God my Saviour, I know Your faithful love,
So I can rest secure in You, when all is said and done.

Bible Study - 2 Timothy 4:6-8

⁶ *As for me, I am even now being poured out like a sacrificial offering of wine, and the time of my departure draws near. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have completed the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ For in the future, a crown of righteousness has been reserved for me, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

Review

The words of this passage are like those of someone who is anticipating death. Nevertheless, the wonderful thing about it is that the more Paul speaks about this, the more he is drawn into writing about the glory of the life of Christian discipleship which is not drawn to a close by the end of earthly life, but fulfilled in the expectation of eternal life, yet

to come! So having begun to speak about his 'departure' (4:6), Paul gives what is now well known as a brief and stirring speech about competing in and completing the 'race of life'. The analogy is simple, brief and memorable, and is one most people remember with ease once they have heard it. However, Paul goes on to speak about the 'crown of life' he anticipates, and it is a crown which has little in common with the famous 'victors crown' of the Greek/Roman games of the day.

Paul, coming to the end of his life? Of course, this is Paul's conclusion to his letter to his friend and colleague Timothy, and after this brief passage, little remains except to offer greetings to various people (4:9-22 – see tomorrow). When Paul writes by speaking about his forthcoming death, we immediately wonder whether this was in fact true. People often anticipate death, but can still be incorrect in their judgement by ten or twenty years! We know that Paul was quite capable of 'jumping the gun' when under pressure, as we see in Acts, when he suddenly demanded of Festus, the Roman procurator in Caesarea, that he be tried in Rome by the Emperor (Acts 25:11). At the time, Paul was hard pressed by the legal system, but given all the circumstances, he was in less personal danger at that time than he had been previously, or later. So here, we can imagine that Paul was writing whilst in Rome, perhaps concerned that his life was slipping away, not just physically but spiritually. As an apostle and evangelist, his house arrest prevented him from doing that to which he was called, despite affording him the usual comforts of life. It must have been frustrating for him to be unable to pursue the ministry he believed that God had called him to do. It may be best to see his phrase 'I am even now being poured out like a sacrificial offering of wine ...' as an expression of his exasperation that he could do little more before he died due to the appallingly lengthy legal processes in Rome. It also reminds us that offerings to God prescribed in the Old Testament were not only the burning of whole animals, but also the pouring out of 'drink offerings' (e.g. Numbers 28:7); and Paul used the image to express his feelings about being unable to do anything except wait on God.

The race of life The stirring words of verse 7 have inspired people for centuries; 'I have fought the good fight, I have completed the race, I have kept the faith ...' This threefold proclamation is a personal comment about conviction, however, and not testimony. Paul had preached for decades about the good news of God and the proper response of people to the love of God in Christ Jesus, and he knew full well that salvation began with the work of the Saviour, Jesus Christ. What Paul says here is therefore not a testimony to God's salvation, but a statement of personal conviction; and by saying this, Paul declared what he had done in response to Christ's call, and he did not say it lightly. So although this great sentence does not refer to Jesus or give glory to God directly, it is nevertheless highly challenging. It asks us to examine whether our own response to Almighty God has been as complete and forthcoming as was Paul's, and because this text is now in scripture, we see it as a 'model' of response to the call of Christian faith. What Paul says is straightforward enough to understand; he has battled against evil, he has finished what God has asked him to do and he has maintained his faith through everything. Now that is a considerable and challenging statement!

A crown of righteousness In the last sentence, we have a glimpse of Paul's personal conviction that the Lord God has 'a place for him' (see John 14:1-7). He expresses this conviction by speaking about a 'crown of righteousness' which he believes will be given him 'on that day'. By this, Paul undoubtedly meant the day when he would meet his Maker and His Saviour, whether the Lord came in glory or whether he died before that time came. In all his writing, Paul spoke eloquently about the fact of Christ's return (see 1 Cor 15:50f. 1 Thess 5:1f.), but he was never pedantic about the exact time of the Lord's return or in the details of his theology about what God would do to establish His Kingdom in glory or re-create the heavens and the earth. Here, Paul seems to warm to the idea of the fulfilment of

his call through meeting again the Lord who first called him on the Damascus Road. He wants to receive from Him the blessing which he had sought, preached and lived for all his subsequent life; the 'righteousness of God', which for him meant direct access to the 'righteous Judge', the Father, the Creator of the world. This final righteousness would 'crown' his life, not because he had beaten other runners in the race, indeed, he specifically wanted to meet others there who had received the same blessing (4:8). The crown symbolised victory over the evil he had fought on his path of life, and completion of a task well done.

All of us can benefit from Paul's generous and open attitude towards completing his own journey of faith. Our own spiritual life may be blessed when we anticipate heaven with happiness.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Paul felt he was being spiritually 'drained' (4:6). What has this affect on people today, and why?
2. In what ways is the Christian journey like a race today? What do we expect to receive for its completion?
3. Do you long to see the 'righteous Judge'? What images of God are difficult for people today because people may not wish to meet such a God?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

It is quite moving to read these words and hear within them something of the challenge of Paul's whole life and experience, and his commitment to the Lord at the end. When meeting people who have spent their lives in the ministry of the church, I find that they, like everyone else, seem to become happier as they grow older or become more discontent and upset. It is as if people either cycle upwards or downwards; full of either great joy or great regrets. By the grace of God there should surely be no reason for regrets if we have run the race that our Lord has given us and been guided by His Spirit, whatever we might think of what is happening in the church today!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *What is the nature of your own Christian 'race', and what are the evils you have to fight along the way? From your point of view, is there any point at which we complete any sections of the race and move on, or is it all one race?*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to be settled and satisfied in their old age or as they approach the end of their lives. If you know any such people and they are close to you, make sure you visit them when you can.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, You look with sadness on our sins and our weaknesses. By the power of Your Holy Spirit, show us those powers of evil which tempt us, bind us, or otherwise occupy our lives; and cast out those that lead us astray. Lead us again in Your pathways, and restore the purity of our love for You. AMEN