

Triumphant to the End

Dr. Paul S. Rees

"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

—II Timothy 4:7.

I have observed that some people, when they read a novel, do not have the patience to wait until the plot is all unfolded and the characters are all disposed of according to the author's plan. So these readers will skip a fistful of pages and peep at the end of the story to see how it comes out. Well, that isn't exactly a recommended method of fiction reading, but it nevertheless indicates how keen is our interest in the way human life turns out, whether for good or bad.

As for the life of the Christian, it is never a mistake to take a look at the end of it. All the testimonies of the centuries form a chorus which rings high confirmation of the truth that John Wesley once expressed when he declared, "Our people die well!"

Look now at this amazing little man, Paul, as he faces the executioner's axe and, beyond that, the mystery which men call death. Scarred but serene, he was triumphant to the end. To his young friend Timothy he calls: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

I.

Listening to the first note in this Christian swan song, one learns that **life is a battle and Paul had fought it.** Every student of the apostle's life has observed how fond he was of language and of figures of speech that were drawn from the battlefield. He exhorts Timothy to "endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (II Timothy 2:3). He tells him also to "fight the good fight of faith" (I Timothy 6:12). To the Ephesian Christians he sends word that they must "put on the whole armor of God" in order to withstand the "wiles of the devil" and to be victorious "in the evil day."

Sometimes Paul's fight, we learn, was with himself. In writing to his Corinthian friends he used the blunt, bold language of the boxing ring, "So fight I," he declares, "not as one that beateth the air; but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway" (I Corinthians 9:26, 27). "I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it," is the way it reads in the Revised Standard Version.

That, as I understand it, is the apostle's vivid and vigorous way of saying that if a man takes the life of Christian righteousness seriously, he must accept the disciplines by which the spiritual subdues, sanctifies and masters the physical. This is not a description of divided living or of defeated living. It is the Christian who has given his Lord an undivided heart and purpose who finds it relatively easy, by the strength of the Holy Spirit, to channel the energies that rise out of his natural instincts and passions into patterns of behaviour that are fine and noble and useful. Yet even that man, with all his fullness of surrender to Christ, will need—sometimes more than others—to fight back some unworthy expression of instinct or appetite and replace it with a worthy one.

We find, moreover, that the apostle Paul sometimes had to fight with evil men. Still

writing to these Christian friends at Corinth, he says, "I have fought with beasts at Ephesus" (I Corinthians 15:32). Some have thought that Paul referred to an actual experience in which he was forced into the arena, as many Christians were, and compelled to defend himself against the lions. It is more likely, however, that he is speaking figuratively of the fierce opposition and persecution he encountered in the pagan city of Ephesus as bitter, stubborn men set themselves against him and his Gospel.

Bishop Ward, of the Methodist Church, was arrested by the Japanese in China. They insisted that he confess to something of which he was not guilty. When he refused, they began to torture him. They played with him like fiends. They finally tried strangulation by water, a form of drowning by forcing water through the nostrils as one lies upon his back. Before losing his power of speech he summoned all his strength of voice as he declared to the officer in charge, "I serve a Christ who never told a lie and who will not permit me to tell one!" His life was spared.

You and I may never be called upon to display a courage as desperate as that, but God grant that we shall live by that principle as we fight our lesser battles against mean and unscrupulous men. Such men are not all across the water nor do they all live behind a yellow skin. Again, **Paul sometimes speaks of his fight with the invisible forces of Satan.**

To the sensitive and yet stalwart saints of the centuries the devil has never been a joke. He was no joke to St. Paul. But if Paul never made light of the devil, neither did he fall for him. In Christ's conquering name Paul fought him at every turn of the road; and finally, at the end, he was able to lift his triumphant witness, "I have fought a good fight." The battle with himself, the battle with ungodly and unrelenting men, the battle with the hidden empires of darkness—he had fought through it all and, thanks to the risen Saviour, he had come off more than conqueror.

II.

Tune in again on the apostle's swan song, and you learn that **life is a race and Paul had**

TRUST ALSO

"Commit thy way unto the Lord, Trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass" (Psalm 37:3).

"Commit thy way unto the Lord AND TRUST!"
Ah! it is here we fail. We give the wheel
Of our small bark to Him; but then we thrust
Our hand upon His hand,
And dare to stand
Beside our Master, lest He wreck our keel.

"Commit thy way unto the Lord AND TRUST!"
There is an "ALSO" we too oft forget,
And so are plagued and worried. Oh! we must
"TRUST ALSO," then our soul
Shall cease to roll
In restlessness and reason and regret.

Commit! and then committed, trust His word!
Has He not said that He will bring thee through?
Trust His strong arm; and when wild storms are
heard,
Believe He holds them still
By His strong will.
Trust Him, the Wise, the Faithful, and the True.

Trust Him to manage all that thou dost now
Commit to Him; the ship, the sails, the sea,
The sailors, thy strange crew. And ask not how
He will do all for thee,
But trustful be.
Lie down and rest, from anxious worry free.

—Selected

finished it. The figure is picturesque and vigorous. If the old tradition is correct, according to which Paul wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, then it was he who developed this illustration so powerfully: "Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us 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 finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1, 2).

A race must have a start. So it is with our life in Christ. Paul knew the day and the hour when life for him was made over, and Christ came into his soul like the glory of a summer dawn. A race must have a course. It is never an aimless, ambling affair. Its path is marked out. For this gallant apostle Jesus Christ and his way of living became the essential and excellent pattern of his whole experience. A race must have rules. With Paul there was no question as to the conditions to be met both by himself and his fellow Christians; they must "lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us"; or, as Moffatt translates it, "we must strip off every handicap, strip off sin with its clinging folds." A race requires concentration. "Let us run with patience (that is, with endurance) the race that is set before us, "looking unto Jesus," or as Moffatt has it, "with our eyes fixed on Jesus."

Look now at this little man who was at the end of the Christian marathon. He had made the start; he had accepted the course; he had observed the rules; and he had kept his eyes steadily and deliberately and confidently upon Christ. Not all of his friends have done as well: He had been compelled to write a letter to some of the members of the Christian Church in Galatia who had lost their vision of the Saviour and had been sidetracked. "Ye did run well for a season," said Paul, sadly, "who did hinder you?" And then there was his friend Demas. Demas had been his companion in travel for a time. They had worked together in circulating the "good news" about Jesus Christ the Redeemer. Then one day, Paul had to take his pen and write back to the brethren; "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world." He didn't keep his eyes upon Christ. He let other voices and other views entice him—and he failed to finish his race.

But not Paul! His was the constant gaze—fixed on the Son of God. His was the power to see it through. His was the long-term loyalty. His was the endurance that, panting but persistent, deserted but dauntless, carried through to the finish-line.

III.

And now for the third lyric note in the apostle's swan song: "I have kept the faith." **Life is a trust and Paul had been faithful to it.** He had kept up his personal trust in Christ against every opportunity and every solicitation to abandon it. More than that, he had declared and defended that incomparable body of truth which had as its glowing center the crucified Saviour. Thus it was that he had kept the faith in his own heart and had kept it in the Church.

Responsible Christian living never found a more devoted example than it had in this amazing man of Tarsus. As he went through life he kept saying, "I am debtor . . . I am debtor . . . I owe something to everybody, and I want to keep faith with him."—The Herald.