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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
November 17, 2019
23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Saints Triumphant

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 65:17-25, Luke 20:27-30
Hymns: 537; 613; 447; 413:5,6

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

⁶ For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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.

¹⁶ At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them.

¹⁷ But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and *that* all the Gentiles might hear. Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. ¹⁸ And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve *me* for His heavenly kingdom. To Him *be* glory forever and ever. Amen! (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Knowing victory when you see it. --

Sometimes people speak of losing the battle but winning the war. From the outside things may look quite dire, but there is something else going on when one is able to look a little deeper. That was one of Paul's purposes in writing this epistle to Timothy. Paul's situation was a cause of great distress for his young associate. Paul was a prisoner in Rome for the second time. He had been acquitted of any wrong doing the first time and released, but now Paul was once again a prisoner awaiting trial before Emperor Nero who had decided to use the Christians and Jews as scapegoats to fulfill his own ambitious plans for Rome. Things did not look good for Paul. It was apparent that it was only a matter of time before his earthly fate would be decided and he would face the executioner's sword. It would be easy for Timothy and many of the early Christians to feel that this was a great defeat for Christianity, and a terrible defeat for Paul individually. And so the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to present Timothy and the rest of Christendom as well a lesson concerning the Christian's Victory. Today is Saints Triumphant Sunday and in our text we are shown some -

THEME: Features of the Christian's Ultimate Victory.

It all begins with finishing!

I. Finishing the Race of this Life.

It isn't so much that the Apostle Paul desired Timothy or any of the rest of us to see life as a rat race, or even as a fight, though our text appears to state that it was a fight that Paul had fought. Actually Paul is comparing one's Christian life with an athletic contest like a marathon race. Paul had been running the race and now it was run. It was run to the glory and honor of God. Paul declares that the end of his life would actually be simply a little different form of sacrifice than his life had been leading up to this moment. He was living his life as a thank offering to God, and now that Paul was facing the end of

his life, an end that was to be a martyr's death, that was also to be an offering in which his life was to be poured out to the praise and glory of God. Paul did not see this as a terrible thing, but an honor for Paul to willingly offer his life for Christ rather than deny the Lord who had redeemed him with His holy precious blood in His death on the cross. Paul had faithfully served the Lord, boldly testifying to both Jew and Gentile the wonders of God's grace and love in Jesus Christ.

Paul sets an example for us that we might live a victorious life of faith. Recall what Paul wrote in his epistle to the Romans: *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."* ² *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."* (Romans 12:1-2)

To our old adam it might not seem to be reasonable at all that we should offer our lives as a living sacrifice to God. It is only reasonable when faith takes hold of the ransom price which Jesus paid out in His blood for us; a ransom price that redeemed us from sin and death, that redeemed us to God. **God saved our lives!** It is then reasonable that we live our lives to Him! That is the race that we run, the contest to live in a manner that is pleasing to God, and worthy of Jesus' sacrifice. It leads us away from the values of the world that put personal fulfillment and pleasure first, and directs us to serve God and our neighbor in a self-sacrificing way. We live to our Savior's glory by denying **ungodliness**, (That means saying "NO" to sin!) and then by example showing the world the way of the Lord. This is the race that we run, and we enter this contest against the flesh, against the world, and most certainly against the devil's temptations, prepared to go the distance. Yes, prepared to die for Jesus.

Another feature of Christian Victory Paul writes about is --

II. Keeping the Faith.

Paul is not talking about maintaining his personal faith in Jesus as his Savior. While that is very important in securing the Christian's victory, that is actually the culmination of all the things we are speaking of here. Paul is here referencing our keeping the Christian faith or the body of teachings or doctrine that make up the one true faith. As soon as Paul began his apostolic ministry false teachings arose challenging the gospel of grace in Christ. Almost immediately the "Judaizers" arose who followed right after Paul moving from city to city, claiming to be only advancing the teachings of Paul by instructing people in the Old Testament Mosaic Law or ceremonial law. They taught these new Christians that by maintaining the ceremonial law one's salvation was made more secure, that indeed it added a new dimension of righteousness to their lives.

Paul had lived much of his life as a Pharisee who focused on the strict observance of these same laws for righteousness. Paul could have found it reasonable and personally attractive to incorporate some aspects of the law to his preaching and teaching and personal life. But he didn't do that! In fact he referred to his past life of pursuing righteousness by his own works as garbage, fit only to be thrown away. He warned adamantly against falling away from the truth of salvation by grace, for works of righteousness could only destroy the gospel of Christ crucified. He taught that it is *"by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast. ¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."* (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Wherever and however false teaching reared its ugly head Paul opposed it, even calling out Peter for slipping into a behavior that belied the truth that there is no difference

between Jew and Gentile but that we are all saved by grace and all are one in Christ.

Keeping the faith isn't only an apostle's job. It is the focus of every single Christian, that we maintain for ourselves and for those around us the one true faith. It is all too easy to compromise and go along with a little false teaching. Maybe going to a different church would make matters easier for family, or for our professional life. Maybe we could have more friends, or better church programs if only we weren't so particular about every little teaching of the Bible. But then Jesus didn't say teaching them to observe *some* of what I have commanded you, or even *most* of what I have commanded you. Jesus said, "Teaching them to observe **ALL** that I have commanded you!" (Matthew 28:18) While it may at first appear that some difference in teaching can't matter that much, **it does!** It undermines the authority of the Word of God in people's hearts and minds. Once that is eroded one may easily slide into questioning more and more of what the Bible teaches, and ultimately lose that confidence of salvation that is found in the incredible truth that **One died for all!** It is so important that we, along with the Apostle Paul come to the end of our lives asserting "**I have kept the faith!**"

What Paul looks forward to is --

III. Receiving the Crown of Righteousness.

Paul is not referring to the crown of a king. It is the laurel wreath that is placed upon the winner's head at Greek games. It was a picture Timothy and most Christians throughout the world understood. Even though sports are hardly mentioned in Scripture they were very popular even among segments of Jewish society. Everyone was familiar with the recognition given to those who won a victory. Paul is acknowledging that this is the kind of reception the child of God receives as he leaves this valley of sorrows and enters into the glory of heaven. This crown of righteousness is not something awarded by merit, but something already secured for the child of God by grace

through faith in Christ. Once again I repeat Paul's familiar words: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."* (Ephesians 2:8-9) The Lord won the big battle! Jesus defeated the devil, and through faith in Christ God credits us with the righteousness of Christ.

That crown of righteousness which Jesus secured for you and me awaits us in heaven. This is kind of a big deal, because the Lord is receiving us into the heavenly glory that He has secured and reserved for us in heaven. When a child of God leaves this world it is not all gloom and doom, even though that is the earthly perception as we experience grief and the loss of one whom we so dearly love. But for them it is all about the **victory!** We are told in the book of Psalms: ***"Precious in the sight of the Lord Is the death of His saints."*** (Psalm 116:15) "What?" you ask. "How can that be?" Because we are not lost forever, but entering into His glory. We die in the hope of resurrection and everlasting life. Death has lost its sting because of the victory we have in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:54-57)

Ultimately Paul's confidence was not from within. It was not that he had such a strong faith that he could not be shaken even in the face of the executioner's sword. Actually he speaks of being let down by people who might have been able to speak up for him and defend him. However Paul had something better, that was -

IV. Knowing the Lord's Power and Presence.

In the closing verses of our text Paul focuses on the power of God that sustained him throughout his ministry, indeed throughout all his trials and tribulations.

2 Timothy 4:16-18 "At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them.

¹⁷ But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and *that* all the Gentiles might hear. Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. ¹⁸ And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve *me* for His heavenly kingdom. To Him *be* glory forever and ever. Amen!"

Yes, people are weak. Even those whom we set up on pedestals; they all have feet of clay. We all fail others when they need us the most. That is what Paul experienced. Of course he was disappointed. This doesn't mean that he was completely left alone. Luke and perhaps a few others remained close by and encouraged Paul and provided for Paul as much as they were able. However, those who could have interceded for him before Nero, they feared and they failed Paul. One did not fail Paul and that was the Lord. The Lord sustained Paul with the blessed gospel of His love, peace, and forgiveness. With the gospel in one's heart there is always hope. We already understand from Paul's own words that his hope was not for this life. The hope that he had was not diminished by the prospect of a martyr's death. It was strong and bright and clear. The Lord had delivered Paul out of the lion's mouth. It is unclear if this is a reference to the circus where Christians were thrown to the lions, or to the devil, who as a roaring lion is always on the prowl; either way the devil was defeated and Paul was delivered. God who saved Paul from the devil will deliver Paul from evil work. Paul knew the sword was going to fall and his earthly life would be ended. Paul also knew that his Lord and Savior would in and through that act of violence by evil men receive Paul into heavenly glory. The Lord sustained Paul and comforted him.

Such is our strength and hope in the Lord whatever we may face. And it may well be severe persecution, or the trial of sickness. We know that at the end of our pilgrimage we shall face what many think of as the specter of death. But the Lord sustains us in true faith. The Lord is always by our side. He makes His presence

and power evident for us in the evil day. He will also deliver us from every evil work and every tribulation. *“The Lord is your keeper; The Lord is your shade at your right hand. ⁶The sun shall not strike you by day, Nor the moon by night. ⁷The Lord shall preserve you from all evil. ⁸The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in From this time forth, and even forevermore.”* (Psalm 121:5-8)

That is the truth that lies at the heart of Saints Triumphant Sunday. It is the Lord who saves us. It is the Lord who preserves us now and forevermore. We may think of ourselves as being a part of the Church Militant, still engaged in the struggle, still confessing our Lord Jesus before the world. Many have gone before us to be a part of the Church Triumphant, not only great names like the Apostle Paul, but also children of God who are very near and dear to our hearts. Know this that even as they now enjoy the victory, and are adorned with that crown of righteousness, we too already possess this victory through faith in Christ. **To Him alone be the glory!**

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans 15:13)