

**“Paul’s Final Perspectives”**  
2 Timothy 4:6-8 (NRSV)

A memorable line by **Frank Langbridge** pictures two people who find themselves in prison, but who are, in fact, a universe apart in their thoughts:

Two [people] looked through the bars.  
One saw the mud, the other, the stars.

(A Cluster of Quiet Thoughts, London:  
The Religious Tract Society, 1896, n.p.)

There’s something about **looking at the stars** that gets us in a way that merely looking at the everyday, humdrum conditions of our lives will never accomplish. Think of the times you’ve lain on your back, away from the bright city lights, out somewhere in the country, or by the sea, looking up into the heavens, pondering the stars. It touches our souls. It can teach us something about our humble place in the scheme of things, and it can bring us to the very threshold of eternity. **Kennon Callahan** says we should preach more about the vast, immense and twinkling, starry hosts of heaven. I agree.

As **Paul languished in Rome’s cold, dripping, subterranean Mamartine prison**, mud and dust must have coated his clothes and it seemed an appropriate symbol for his life. He was now nobody special, having lost his former, highborn university airs and Roman citizenship advantages by following Jesus. He was also a poor man, having given up any preferment or cushy retirement plan. Apart from Luke, he was also bereft of the presence of friends and forsaken by his one-time followers. Charged with sedition, he probably suffered contempt and abuse from his jailers. And Paul had become a joke among his enemies. It is clear some believers must have reasoned his final miseries proved that even God had abandoned him. As he languished in his dungeon cell, his work in Ephesus was being ripped apart by religious wolves like Hymenaeus and Philetus, who taught that the future resurrection of believers was past and that all the prosperities of heaven were present for most believers here and now, but not for the old and faithful apostle, Paul.

Name it and claim it, that’s what faith’s about!  
You can have what you want if you just have no doubt.  
**John G. Stackhouse, Jr.**, “The Gospel Song,” unpublished.)

Since Paul's plight and imminent death were due to his own theology and sin, therefore they said, "Shame on you, Paul."

So there was **plenty of mud around** – enough to fill anyone's horizon. But amazingly, **the apostle looked up and saw the stars!** The brief paragraph that is comprised of verses 6-8 is, in fact, a glorious declaration of personal triumph. In verse 6 he looks at the present and sees the stars that God has displayed; in verse 7 he looks back at the past and, again, he sees the stars that God has provided for his people; and, in verse 8 he looks at the future and, once again, he sees the vast panoply of God's amazing, twinkling stars.

Paul's final perspectives at the end of his life, even though he is dying, cover every conceivable span of his existence. Like the stars God gave us to view, they are awesome. They tell us how to live and how to die.

### 1. Stars in the present (2 Tim. 4:6).

The present reality for Paul was that he was **dying and departing**: "As for me I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come" (4:6). Paul borrowed the vivid image of "**being poured out like a libation [or 'drink offering']**" from the Jewish custom of pouring out some wine at the base of the altar as part of the ritual sacrifice of a lamb (Exod. 29:40-41; Lev. 23:13; Nu. 15:1-12; 28:7, 24).

This extravagant image of **red wine splashing** down upon the altar and on the floor had become an operative metaphor for how Paul regarded his life. Some five years earlier, Paul had written to the Philippians about the possibility of his death drawing near, describing it as being "poured out as a libation [or 'drink offering'] over the sacrifice and offering of [their] faith" (Php. 2:17). There it was hypothetical. Now, as he writes to Timothy, it is actual and real. Now he is using the present tense to indicate the certainty of the event, as if it were actually taking place (George W. Knight, 1992, 458). Though there would be a little more time before it happened – he still had time to ask for his books and a warm coat (4:13) -- **the last drops of Paul's blood were already in a sense beginning to fall.**

**Yet Paul was triumphant.** It's clear Paul did not think of himself as about to be executed, but rather offering himself to God.

From the time of his conversion on the Damascus Road, everything he had committed to God -- his previous position and reputation, the promise of a wealthy income and privileged security, his brilliant mind and his passions, his relationships and his dreams, were all given to God. For years the red blood of his life had been spilling onto the altar. Now all that remained was his life's breath, and he triumphantly gave that as well.

By calling his death a **“departure”** (4:6b), Paul indicated the journey was not over, that his life wouldn't end completely – he was only leaving one station for another – and, that once on the way, he had no fear of death. The word translated “departure” is used in Greek literature to describe **the loosing of a ship from its moorings** or **a soldier loosening the stakes of his tent**. It pictures a ship lifting anchor, tossing off the ropes, and rising on the tide so the winds can carry her to sea. The word radiates sweet, triumphant continuance. C. S. Lewis had it right in The Last Battle where it is explained to the deceased children that “they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before” (1956, p. 184).

I've been following the Globe and Mail correspondence of **Ian Brown** who has a child with a severe handicap and **Jean Vanier**, the gifted, humble philosopher, who is also the founder of the L'Arche communities all over the world which shelter severely handicapped people. A week ago Saturday's exchange of letters dealt with the ravages of aging and approaching death – Vanier has just turned 80 years old -- and the meaning of heaven. Unsurprisingly, Vanier's attitude is the same as the apostle Paul's. He's not afraid of death; he welcomes it (Sat. Feb. 21/09, F5).

Final “departure” was the culmination of Paul's long-held dream that he had earlier expressed to his Philippian friends, saying, **“My desire is to depart”** – to cast off the lines – **“and be with Christ, for that is far better”** (1:23b). Hard as it is to believe, those who have departed this world to be with Christ are far better off. Paul was 65 when he died. Though you have lived 75 years or more, it is better to be with Christ. Even if you have lived only five years or less, it is better to be above with Christ. Though you may be brilliant, it is far better to be with Christ. Though you may be among the richest people in town, life in heaven with Christ is far better. Though you might have the greatest gifts for ministry, it is far better.

What is it **Charles Dickens**' protagonist said in his novel, A Tale of Two Cities? "It is a far better thing I do than I have ever done...." This idea of "**far better**" dominated Paul's thoughts as it should ours.

Here was a man who saw imminent death in the face and saw the stars.

## 2. Stars in the past (2 Tim. 4:7).

The present also held no fear for Paul. It, too, was a triumph. As he looked back, he said, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (4:7).

**"I have fought the good fight"** (4:7a). I have once imaginatively pictured the apostle Paul at the end of his career **dressed like a Roman soldier**, accoutered in the armour he extensively described in Ephesians 6.

Here is how I saw him: He has worn his war belt so long, it is sweaty through and through, and salt-stained and comfortable, like an old horse's bridle, and it holds everything perfectly in place. This **"belt of truth"** -- God's truth -- has girded him so tightly for years it has pulled everything together in his whole life. His battered torso is sheathed with a battle-tarnished breastplate. It is criss-crossed with great lateral grooves from slicing sword blows and dented from enemy artillery. The **"breastplate of righteousness"** has preserved his vitals intact. His holy life has rendered his heart impervious to the spiritual assaults of Satan.

His gnarled and sturdy, short and stubby legs are comfortable in his ancient war boots. He has stood his ground in innumerable battles on several continents. **These boots are "the gospel of peace"** -- the peace with God that comes through faith in him and the resultant peace of God -- the wellbeing and wholeness -- the shalom -- that is the mark of every Christian. He stands in peace, and being rooted in peace, he cannot be moved.

Paul's great shield haunts the eyes, for the broken shafts embedded in it and the many charred holes in it reveal him to be a victor, but wounded victor, of many fierce battles. The **"shield of faith"** held up, as he has believed God's Word, has caught and extinguished many a fiery dart of doubt and sensuality and many a secular onslaught. None have touched him mortally.

On his old grey head he wears a helmet that has seen better days. Great dents mar its symmetry, reminders of furtive blows dealt him by the enemy. Because it is **“the helmet of salvation”** Paul has a deep inner confidence. He knows that no matter what happens he is saved and safe in God’s hands. He can stand tall against the most vicious assaults.

Then there is Paul’s sword. He was equal to an hundred when his sword flashed. **“The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God”** – his ultimate weapon, cut through everything that was offensive, as well as enemy defenses: armour, flesh, glistening bone, marrow. It penetrated right through to the soul (Heb. 4:12).

What an awesome figure Paul was. He’d stood his ground against countless enemies; he’d stood before Felix and Agrippa, as well as the legates and officials of Rome – and he’d not given an inch. He was the consummate warrior. So when he says here, **“I have fought the good fight,”** every nuance is true. He’d begun on the Damascus Road thirty years earlier and, after a time away for reflection in the Arabian desert, he’d travelled the ancient world in three great missionary journeys. The fourth, I believe ended in Rome as he sought to take the Word to Spain’s “spires away on the world’s rim” (**John Masefield**).

Brave Paul had not only contended with false brethren among his own people, but also with the false teachers within the churches he’d founded. As he wrote, he’d not only “struggle[d] against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). He’d not only suffered a litany of dangers and indignities (2 Cor. 11:23-33), but he’d shouted in the midst of the battle, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom. 8:37). After all his battles, he was at peace.

So now, with the day fading, he could look back on his life and say, **“I have fought the good fight.”** “I’ve fought it; it’s complete; I’m done.” What a triumph to look back over the mud and dust of the years, over one’s mistakes and losses, failures and faintings and precious victories and still say, **“I have fought the good fight.”** “It’s okay. I see the stars!”

The second of Paul's declarations, "**I have finished the race**" probably means "**I have finished the race course**" (Ralph Earle, 1996, p. 186). God had set a specific course before Paul, some of which had been revealed to him at the beginning of his Christian ministry when Ananias informed him of the fact that he was God's "instrument to bring his name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" and of "how much he must suffer for the sake of [God's] name" (Acts 9:15-16). Now Paul had completed that course.

It's significant Paul made **no boast of having won the race** but simply stated that **he'd finished it**. There was no ego here, only satisfaction in having completed the race. Everything God had set before him had been accomplished. The writer of Hebrews notes that every believer has a course marked out for him or her, and urges us to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1b).

**The course is unique for each one of us.** You don't have to run my course, and I don't have to run yours. Some courses are relatively straight, some seem to be all turns. Some seem to be uphill, some are as flat as the Sumas or Matsqui Prairie. All seem long, but some are longer. The only thing is you have to run or walk your own. The glory is that each of us can finish the race "marked out for us" (NIV), because the course has been well laid out for us by our sovereign and loving God. Those of us with only a few years left and those who are just beginning can all finish the course with distinction. There is no way you will not be able to complete yours unless you willfully run your own race rather than God's.

Paul completed his race because he'd set his heart to pay attention to and follow God – as he'd expressed it to the Ephesian elders: "if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace" (Acts 20:24). What satisfaction he must have been experiencing in these last days! Despite his circumstances, despite the judgments of his detractors, despite the execution that was surely coming, he'd finished the race. And there was more ahead; he saw the stars beckoning.

Paul's third retrospect – "**I have kept the faith**" – refers to his having maintained the apostolic deposit of teaching, the truth of the gospel which he had in various places also charged Timothy to "keep" (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14; 4:2).

All this Paul had done with distinction and he'd done it with the deepest belief and trust in God. **Paul “persevered in what he preserved”** (George W. Knight, p. 460).

What a triumph it was for Paul to raise his eyes from the mud of his surroundings, look back across the embattled years, and proclaim with utter confidence and finality, **“I have fought the good fight.”** I didn't back away – ever. I weathered all that came my way. I took up the sword of the Word of God and fought until it was one with my hand and arm.

What a victory it was for him to declare **“I have finished the race.”** I kept the course you have laid out for me from the beginning of time. I finished the marathon. I am done. I revel and rest in that.

What satisfaction it was for Paul to avow, **“I have kept the faith.”** I kept it whole and pure. I preached it. I lived it. My life has been and will be, to my dying day, a gospel life. Come what may, it hasn't diminished one bit.

The stars fill the sky over Paul and he shines in their light.

### 3. **Stars in the future** (2 Tim. 4:8).

Paul has looked at the present and the past. Now to complete his thought, he looks to the future: “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” (4:8).

Notice that the “crown” that awaits Paul is not a crown of glory (1 Pe. 5:4), or a crown of peace, or a crown of joy, but **“the crown of righteousness.”** Of course, no one can give this crown to oneself. The righteous judge is Jesus Christ. He will judge whether we are worthy of **this victory garland at the end of the race.** In fact, the Lord had already given Paul his righteousness when he'd first believed and chose to actively exercise his faith in Christ. But now because he has been faithful, Jesus Christ will give him an ultimate, permanent state of righteousness. As **Gordon Fee** aptly remarks, “One receives the final crown of righteousness precisely because one has already received the righteousness of Christ.” (p. 461). Deep in his heart, Paul knew all this to be true. Therefore he could look up through the bars and see the Morning Star -- another name for Jesus Christ (Rev. 2:28; 22:16) – bearing in his hand Paul's future “crown of righteousness.”

Wonder of wonders this ultimate crown is not reserved only for great ones like the apostle Paul, “but also to all [of us] who have longed for [the Lord’s] appearing” (4:8b). Christians are people who love Jesus Christ, and because they love him, they long for his appearing. Our true country is heaven – these are but the “shadowlands” (C. S. Lewis). What that will be like no one knows completely. But books like The Shack (by William P. Young, 2007) help to give us a picture – it is a place of unparalleled desire fulfilled and pure delight.

Do you love our Lord’s appearing? Do you long for his final return? Then this crown is reserved for you too.

Paul’s brilliant three verse paragraph burst, no doubt, like the red, yellow, white and blue light of fireworks on Timothy’s soul – and it still shines on us today. Deep in the mud of the earth, **Paul looked at his present**, inevitable, approaching death as a triumphant sacrifice and as a loosening of the mooring at the beginning of a great new voyage. The bars of death became a grid for the stars beyond.

And **as he looked back** on his life, he voiced a trio of unshakeable satisfactions: “I have fought the good fight.” That fact could not be denied. “I have finished the faith.” Nothing was left undone. “I have kept the faith.” He was true to the gospel in every way. He never let up; he never slackened. From the mud he saw it all. And the stars shone brightly.

And **as he looked forward**, he saw the Lord Jesus himself, the bright Morning Star, bringing “the crown of righteousness” to place on his faithful servant’s waiting brow. “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the rest of your Master.” There was light at midnight.

The end awaits us all, and for some it will be sooner than we think. At that final moment, may we have lived our lives in such a way that as we see what lies before us we see the stars, and as we look back, we see the stars, and as we look forward we see the Star that has been shining over us from the very beginning. Amen

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