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## *The Story: Paul's Final Days* II Timothy

As most of you know, last week we hosted the SOLD experience, an eyes-wide-open look at the issue of human trafficking. Over 660 participated! Beth Burgess and the rest of our team deserve a big "thank you" for pulling this off monumental event.

I wanted to share one powerful story resulting from SOLD. On Thursday night as we were setting up the exhibit, part of that process involved taping up pictures of local children who have gone missing, many of them lured into the sex trade. One of our volunteers took a picture of that display and posted it on Facebook. Within 24 hours, one of those young girls who had been missing for 18 months was found! Isn't that amazing? The story isn't over. She is now 18, pregnant and not ready to return home. But for the first time in a year and a half, her parents have spoken to her, and there is hope for a better future.

We are in the final three weeks of our year-long journey through *The Story*, an abridged version of the Bible. And by now we have seen, again and again, that even when things look dark and hopeless, the final chapter has not yet been written. God is still in control; the Holy Spirit is still at work; hope is still alive.

Next weekend we will come to the final book of the Bible, Revelation, which gives us a glimpse into the future, victorious return of Christ. That means that today we come to the historical end of the story as recorded in the Book of Acts. Acts concludes with Paul's arrest in Jerusalem and his transport to Rome where he awaits the incredible opportunity to present the gospel of Jesus to Emperor Nero. This was in about 60 A.D.

While he waited, Paul wrote four letters which we know as the Prison Epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. It is clear from some of those writings that Paul expects to be executed. Nero was a bad guy. But as it turned out, Paul was released. We think he made one more missionary journey, perhaps as far west as Spain.

But five years later, Paul is re-arrested and returned to Rome. This time, he did not enjoy the comforts of house arrest. He was thrown into the Mamartine Prison which overlooks the Forum in Rome. I have been in the Mamartine. It is dark and dank. This was the dungeon of the condemned. Peter was held here before he was

executed around 65 A.D. Tradition holds that he asked to be crucified upside down because he did not consider himself worthy to die the death of his Master, Jesus.

But he was a Roman citizen; it was against the law to flog or crucify a Roman citizen. He would be beheaded. We have no biblical account of this final chapter of Paul's life. As I said, Acts ends with him in Rome during his first imprisonment, but we do have one last word from Paul written as he sat in the Mamartine. It is the letter we know as II Timothy, written to his young disciple. This is really Paul's fifth Prison epistle because, as we will see, he expected any moment to be executed. These are among my favorite words from Paul—words to live and die by. So as we close out the historical portion of The Story, join me as we listen in on the final thoughts of this faithful man.

<sup>6</sup>For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. <sup>7</sup>I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup>Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

<sup>9</sup>Do your best to come to me quickly, <sup>10</sup>for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. <sup>11</sup>Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is useful to me in my ministry. <sup>12</sup>I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. <sup>13</sup>When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

<sup>14</sup>Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. <sup>15</sup>You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message. <sup>16</sup>At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.

<sup>17</sup>But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. <sup>18</sup>The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

As I said, the Mamartine was not a pleasant place, especially when you were an old man who had endured all that Paul had. So what is his state of mind? First of all, it is obvious that his days are numbered, and he knows it. <sup>6</sup>"For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure." Of course this wasn't the first time Paul faced death, as we discovered last week: a stoning, beatings, flogging, shipwreck, snake bite—and when he was arrested in Jerusalem, soldiers had to sneak him away in the middle of the night to the city town of Caesarea because a group of assassins vowed not to eat until they had

killed Paul. (They must have gotten very hungry because they didn't get him. God wasn't done yet.)

Paul had faced death before. But this time, it's for real; these are his last days. And he's lonely. Verse 16 is so sad: "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me." Have you ever felt utterly abandoned in your time of greatest need? Then you know what Paul must have been feeling. Some, like Demas and Alexander, flat out betrayed him and harmed him. Others—Titus, Crescens, Tychicus—Paul sent away to continue their ministry. Only Dr. Luke remained. So, Paul was lonely and longed for his young friend to come visit him.

He was also cold! In a wonderful little tidbit, Paul asks Timothy to bring his cloak with him. His old blood was a lot thinner than it used to be, and that dungeon was freezing!

So, facing death, abandoned and lonely, freezing cold—Paul's final days were rough. But in the midst of that he can look back over 35 years with Christ, and offer a powerful and hopeful assessment of his life: "<sup>7</sup>I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Isn't that magnificent? Cyndi knows I want those words engraved on my tombstone, and I pray that I will be found worthy of such an epitaph.

Paul makes three assertions about his life. First, "I have fought the good fight." It doesn't take very long to discover that life is a battle. Some months back, one of our staff members received news she had cancer. So began the long, frightening and exhausting process of chemo. But what impressed me is how Patti just kept fighting! She bought herself a beautiful wig—and a baseball cap for when she didn't feel wiggy—and just kept working! She never gave up! I never heard her feeling sorry for herself although she was certainly afraid. But it was inspiring to watch how she fought! (And a blessing when this week she reported that she is cancer-free! Hallelujah!) Keep fighting!

And notice what kind of fight... the "good" fight. Does that mean a fight that doesn't give up? Yes. Does that mean a "fair" fight, even when others fight dirty? Yes. And does it mean that the fight itself is holy—a worthy and sacred scuffle? Yes! One of the great things about SOLD was the action we could take. We weren't just horrified or disgusted; there were things we could do to fight back against this monstrous behavior. Do you think that God considers destroying slavery to be a good fight?

This week I visited FISH Food Bank (and ran into about six CHPC volunteers; go team!) I met with Ron and Jan Coen, the founders of FISH. I was so impressed by their faithful witness to Christ in providing food and kindness and dignity to those who live in the shadows of prosperous Gig Harbor. It is never easy; resources are always limited, but they are fighting against the forces of poverty and humiliation... and it is a good fight!

What is the good fight you are fighting? Or that you ought to be fighting but have retreated from? I have fought the good fight. This speaks of courage.

Then Paul writes, "I have finished the race." You know, in a race, finishing is everything. It doesn't matter how you run the first 9/10<sup>ths</sup> of the thing—if you don't cross that finish line nothing else matters! But it's not just finishing, it's finishing well, isn't it? It's throwing yourself across the tape, utterly spent, having given everything you have to that effort.

You see this vividly in Paul's concluding comments. He has just told Timothy that his death is imminent, and yet what does he ask for? His books and his parchments! Remember, much of what we call the New Testament began as a parchment of Paul! Yes, he expected to die anytime, but until he was gone he was going to pour himself into his work. He would continue to study and write and care for his churches—the ministry God had given him. Paul was going to live until he died! He would finish!

Last year, Tanguy Pepiot, a runner for the University of Oregon, had a huge lead on his UW rival, Meron Simon, and looked to be a sure victor. Then this happened. [video clip]

"He will never make that mistake again." I'll bet. But I know too many who do make the mistake of coasting at the end. I think of a pastor who served his church well for nearly 30 years, yet in the final months, things went sideways and his ministry there ended in bitterness and rancor which haunts the church still. You are not done until you are done—in ministry, in your work, in your marriage, in your parenting, in your school. Finish the race! Don't take the foot of the gas. Don't rest on your laurels. Don't work or serve or lead or live lackadaisically. Run hard until the end. Why? Because "whatever you do, in word or in deed, you do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus!" Right? I have fought the good fight—courage. I have finished the race—endurance.

And finally, I have kept the faith. This is the word of integrity. It is not enough to fight hard—to fight with endurance—if in the end, you toss aside the values and beliefs you were fighting and running to promote. Your walk must match your talk. What you do in the dark must match how you live in the light. To the end, Paul sought to live his life with integrity before Christ. And we see a hint of that in his closing comments as well. Did you notice for whom he asked? <sup>11</sup>"Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is useful to me in my ministry." Do you know who this Mark is? John Mark... remember the kid who set out with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey and abandoned them at Perga and returned home? This was that kid... John Mark. This desertion made Paul so mad that later, when they set out on their second journey and Barnabas wanted to give John Mark another chance, Paul said, "No way!" Paul and Barnabas were so divided over this issue that they split up, and as far as we know never saw or spoke to one another again.

But it turns out, Barnabas was right. John Mark deserved another chance, and Paul, to his credit, saw this. The Holy Spirit changed his mind and softened his stubborn heart to admit that he was wrong! He went from considering Mark “useless” to finding him “useful.” Useful indeed! This young boy who abandoned them at Perga eventually wrote the very first of the New Testament accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus: the Gospel of Mark! It took integrity for Paul to actually live out the gracious, second-chance ministry of Jesus that he had been preaching to others all these years.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Who doesn't want that written on their tombstone? But here's the deal: this is not a matter of gritting our teeth, fighting harder, trying to be good. The secret to Paul's legacy is found in the final verses. <sup>17</sup>“But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength... <sup>18</sup>The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

How did Paul live this life of courageous, enduring integrity? Because the Lord stood by him, lived in him, gave him strength and rescued him from evil. Obviously this didn't mean he was preserved from suffering or death. What Paul meant was that the God of the resurrected Jesus could be trusted to bear him through this life and deliver him “safely to his heavenly kingdom.” It was the Holy Spirit in him that helped him to live this way.

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”—courage, endurance, integrity. I'm not kidding; this is what I hope will be carved on my gravestone, and of course my supreme hope is that no one who knew me well will snicker when they read the words. For those of you who, like me, are closer to the end of your life than the beginning, don't you long for the same thing? For those who know you best to speak with sincerity about your courageous, enduring life of integrity?

For those of you who are younger, this might seem like something in the misty future... but you don't know that! You have no idea how many days you have on this earth. The 18-year-olds who died on the beaches of Normandy or Vietnam or in Afghanistan—or Paris or Istanbul this year—they never imagined when they were 16 that life would be cut short. The only way to ensure that you fight for the right things and learn to endure and live with integrity is by starting now. By allowing the Spirit of Jesus to make you into that kind of person starting right now... not someday! Sometimes somedays never come.

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup>Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”