

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 *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. And 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!*

Rest on Christ's Laurels

You have all probably heard the saying “resting on his laurels”. It refers to someone who accomplished something great like winning a gold medal at the Olympics and then is content to lay back and not try hard anymore. They just enjoy the fame and money they already have and don't try to add to it. For example, despite being the most decorated olympian ever, Michael Phelps was not content to rest on his laurels. He trained and strived and competed and came back to compete in Rio and win some more medals. The apostle Paul was however content to rest on his laurels and he encourages Timothy and us to follow the same course. Why? Because it wasn't his accomplishments Paul was resting on. What was Paul resting on? The laurels of the righteous.

The word translated crown in our text refers to the crown of

laurels that they gave out at the original Olympics. It was not the word usually used for the crown of a king but the crown placed upon the victor in an athletic competition. Thus the sports terminology earlier in our text. Fought the good fight. Finished the race. Now those sound like accomplishments, but they aren't really. Paul isn't resting his hope of salvation that he won the fight or the race or that he got top three in the contest. He is exultant that he is about to finish the race. It says nothing about what place. And what contest, what race is he talking about? He tells us. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. The contest, the race, was to keep the faith God had planted in his heart when God called him in Damascus. That was the great contest of Paul's life and Timothy's and yours. We of course weren't called in Damascus. But it doesn't matter where. Through the Gospel in Word or in Baptism, God had called Paul and Timothy to faith, had planted that faith in their hearts and your heart and my heart and our race, our contest is to keep that faith in the face of Satan and the world which fight to destroy it and our sinful nature, which like the foolish fish we heard about two weeks ago, would neglect it.

What is the prize for finishing this race? And once again, notice this laurel doesn't just go to the person in first or second or third it goes to everyone who finishes, even if their faith is as small as a mustard seed. What prize do all who finish get? The laurels of the righteous.

Is anyone feeling let down? Disappointed by the prize? A laurel crown of righteousness doesn't sound very impressive. When the Greeks made laurel crowns they made them of leaves of different sorts, often olive leaves. While cool looking, they weren't really valuable and would soon wither. But this laurel crown that Paul is content to rest his whole life and hope and future and salvation on was not a laurel of leaves but a laurel of righteousness. What does that mean? Well let's use a similar expression. If I said I made a crown of glory for the winner would you understand it to mean I wove metaphysical glory into a physical crown? No, you would understand that this crown wouldn't be something physical and it would represent the glory someone had for winning a contest. So here. Sadly the English leaves out the article that is in the Greek. This crown, this laurel that Paul is resting on is the laurel of the

righteous.

We have contests to determine who the fastest runner or highest jumper is and in those contests we have judges to disqualify cheaters and determine and crown the winner. In the great contest of Paul's life, the race that he was nearly finished with, since he would soon be put to death, that race too had a judge. Paul tells us who that judge is. The Lord, the righteous judge.

How will the Lord, the righteous judge who never gets the call wrong determine who gets the laurels of the righteous? Notice they don't go to the fastest or the strongest. Paul mentions his own weakness. He stood trial before the Emperor of Rome and he stood there alone and was terrified. He was weak, but the Lord strengthened him. Nor does the laurel of the righteous go to those who have lived a righteous life. Notice Paul doesn't say, I have fought the good fight well, I ran the perfect race, I kept the faith perfectly. He just rejoices that he kept the faith in Jesus crucified for his sin at all. In verse 18, he mentions how God will deliver him from every evil work. Yes the evil that world committed against him and the world does the same to us, but also his own evil works. Paul

had not lived a righteous life far from it. He openly confessed himself to be the chief of sinners.

So to whom does the Lord the righteous judge give the laurels of the righteous? Well the answer is right there. He gives it to the righteous. But not those with a righteousness that has its origins in themselves, for they are none such, but with a righteousness that has its origins in Christ. That is the laurel Paul was resting on. Christ's laurels that He gives us become our laurels. Paul was encouraging Timothy and encouraging you to rest on those laurels.

Paul knew he would be put to death soon. He could see the finished line, he but he could not see the other side of the finish line. But he knew that the Lord the maker of heaven and earth was judging everyone who crossed that line and there was only one criteria by which the Lord was judging them - if they had faith. Faith not in themselves but faith in Christ - true God and true man who did live a perfectly righteous life and yet died the death of the sinner, for the sinner, for the sin of the world was put upon Him. Paul knew that to all who had such faith, no matter how small, God would give the laurels of the righteous because through faith in

Christ we are made righteous.

Yes, Paul did not rest on his accomplishments, his laurels. He does not go on about how he lived a good life, how he converted thousands of Gentiles, how he bravely stared down the Roman emperor and thus was saved from being thrown to the lions in the Colosseum. He had been weak and terrified before the emperor and God strengthened him and the message of the Gospel had been preached through Him and God had delivered him from the lions and God had created the faith in his heart so that he, Paul, loved the Lord's appearing.

Before God had placed that faith in his heart, Paul had hated the name of Jesus. Before God had placed faith in his heart, Paul didn't want to hear Jesus' name and when he heard it, he went livid in anger. Before God placed faith in his heart, Paul had wished that Jesus had never been born. But after the Lord put faith in Paul's heart, Paul loved that Jesus had come. He loved and rejoiced that God had become man and lived a perfect life for Paul and for us and died for Paul's evil deeds and our evil deeds. Because Jesus had come and made Paul and you holy by God's blood shed for men,

when Paul crossed that finish line and when you cross that finish line, the Lord, the righteous judge would give to Paul and you and to all who loved Jesus appearing, the crown of the righteous. It doesn't matter what place we finish or how we stagger, limp, or crawl through, all who have loved the Lord's appearing, all who have kept the faith, receive the crown, the laurels of the righteous which the Lord the righteous God will give to you. These laurels don't wilt and they aren't forgotten and with them comes glory immeasurable and a place and a life in heaven. Don't you see how you can rest on that laurel?

Notice as our text says, this crown, this laurel, is already laid up for us. We didn't lay it up. It was laid up by another for you, and that other is Jesus. That is the laurel you can rest on. You race may be nearing its completion or maybe it is still quite a ways away but you can still rest on it for you know what Jesus has done for you and given you.

Now by resting on your laurels, I don't mean sit around in your pajamas doing nothing. I mean you can know with joy and confidence what will happen to you on the other side of the finish

line. I mean you can persevere through the troubles and trials without giving up, knowing what has been laid up for you when your work here is done. By resting on your laurels I mean that despite your evil works you can view your future in heaven with confidence like Jonah. Remember what he said when he was cast from the ship into the sea after fleeing from the Lord in sinful rebellion. **Jonah 2:5-9** ⁵ *The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; The deep closed around me; Weeds were wrapped around my head.* ⁶ *I went down to the moorings of the mountains; The earth with its bars closed behind me forever; Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God.* ⁷ *"When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; ...Salvation is of the LORD."* Jonah rested on His Savior's laurels. Your dear heavenly father is waiting to welcome you into His home and in His son Jesus, give you the crown of the righteous that you might enter into joyous life. Amen.

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