

Sermon Draft Certainty

Text: 2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18

Sermon: “With Confidence”

Having reached the climax of Paul’s argument in this Epistle we now conclude with Paul’s personal reflections on his own life and impending death. Little is known or knowable about the circumstances of Paul’s imprisonment as he writes this letter. His words in 1:17 would seem to indicate that he is imprisoned in Rome, but it seems likely, though unsure that this is not the same imprisonment recorded at the end of Acts, but rather a second imprisonment in Rome later on in Paul’s life. Regardless, Paul writes this letter as one who very much believes that his own death is near. With that in mind, this text provides us an opportunity both to look back on the life of Paul and to consider how we might face the hour of our own death.

Of particular note within the context of this letter is 1:12. In this verse, as Paul expresses the same certainty and confidence that we find in our text, we are provided some important clarity. Paul knows in whom he has believed and, trusting in Christ Jesus, he is sure that he will be delivered from evil and will be awarded the crown of righteousness on the Last Day.

How can we be so sure? That's the question that comes to mind when we read the words of our Epistle today. How can you be so sure?

In our Epistle, we have essentially the final recorded words of the apostle Paul. Paul was in prison when he wrote these words to Timothy, and he very much believed that his earthly life was quickly drawing to a close. He had no way of knowing whether he would actually die in the immediate future, of course, but he firmly believed that his time had come. ***“I am already being poured out as a drink offering,” he said, “and the time of my departure has come”*** (v 6).

Amazingly, despite all the uncertainty about his situation and all the uncertainty that would seem to come along with death itself, Paul is full of certainty as he writes to Timothy. With absolute certainty, he says, ***“The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom”*** (v 18). He has no doubts about that, it seems. And that's not all. A little earlier in our reading, Paul, with the same kind of certainty, says that he is sure that Jesus, the righteous judge, will award him the crown of righteousness in the resurrection on the Last Day. Again, Paul seems to have no doubts. Like I said, it leaves me wondering how Paul can be so sure.

In a world where so much is uncertain, where it sometimes feels as if we can never be sure about anything, this kind of certainty is what we all want, isn't it? We especially want to have this kind of certainty as we face the prospect of our own death someday. So, as we consider these final recorded words from the apostle Paul, let's take a look back at Paul's life and try to answer this question: How could Paul be so sure that Jesus would deliver him from every evil and award him the crown of righteousness on the Last Day?

Paul's certainty was based on his conversion experience. If we're going to look back at Paul's life and ministry to try to find the source of his certainty, the best place to start is probably the beginning, on that road to Damascus. Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1–19) was rather remarkable and undoubtedly left an indelible mark on his life and ministry. Maybe this is what made him so sure.

Many Christians seek to find certainty this way. They focus on conversion experiences and the transformation of their lives which has taken place after having been brought to faith. While Paul's conversion was remarkable, it could not provide absolute certainty. If this one positive experience was the source of Paul's certainty, then the many other negative experiences in his life could have easily robbed him of this certainty.

Like the suffering Paul and his companions experienced in Asia. Although Paul's life had indeed been radically transformed, the transformation was neither complete nor perfect. Paul still struggled with sin, ***“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”*** (Romans 7:15); ***“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”*** (1 Timothy 1:15).

Paul's certainty was based on his apostolic success. After his conversion, Paul was commissioned by Jesus to be the apostle to the Gentiles. He travelled far and wide, proclaiming the Gospel of Christ, and he was incredibly successful as he did so. Maybe this is what made him so sure. Many people (Christians and non-Christians) try to find certainty in life this way. People look at their accomplishments in life, the good works they have done, and try to reassure themselves this way. While Paul had been successful, this also could not provide any real certainty.

Paul hadn't always been successful. Consider Acts 17:22–33, where Paul preaches at the Areopagus in Athens.

Whether this was the result of a failure on Paul's part or the result of the hard hearts of the Athenians isn't necessarily clear, but Paul clearly wasn't completely successful in everything he did. Even if we ignore the times when he was less than successful, how could Paul ever know if he had been successful enough if this was his source of certainty?

Paul's certainty was based on the Lord's past care and provision for Paul. Turning to our text today, we see another potential cause for Paul's certainty. Looking back at his life and some of the difficult times he had experienced, Paul could see how the Lord Jesus had stood by him time and again and safely delivered him (even quite recently, v 17). Maybe this is why Paul was so sure. Many people do find reassurance in life this way, especially in difficult times. They remember times in the past when God had stood by them and faithfully cared for and provided for them. But could memories like these really make Paul sure that he would receive the crown of righteousness on the Last Day? These memories certainly could have been part of Paul's reason for being so sure and would have definitely been a comfort in a time like this. But Paul's certainty here seems to stretch well beyond assurances about God's providential care.

Paul's certainty was based on his faith. Another possibility that our text gives us is that Paul's faith was the source of his certainty. After all, in our reading today, Paul says, ***"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness"*** (vs 7–8). It sure sounds as if Paul's own faith is the source of his certainty, but what exactly does Paul mean here? Many people try to find certainty by trusting in their own faith. These people often say things like "Don't worry, my faith is strong," and put their trust in their own ability to believe. The problem with this kind of certainty, however, is that it is never complete.

What if our faith wavers? What if we doubt? How do we know if we have believed enough? Paul's own faith, his own ability to believe and keep the faith was not his source of certainty, but we're getting closer to the right answer now.

Paul's certainty was based on Christ crucified. To understand how Paul could be so sure and to understand the role of his faith in this certainty, we go back to something at the beginning of his Second Letter to Timothy: ***"I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me"*** (1:12).

The source of Paul's certainty wasn't his own faith, but it was the one in whom he believed. Jesus, the one in whom Paul believed, the object of Paul's faith, was his source of certainty. Or, as Paul put it in Galatians, "***Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ***" (6:14).

Paul's certainty, his assurance, wasn't in anything inside himself. It was in Christ and in Christ alone. Because he knew and believed Christ had been crucified for him and for the world, Paul was sure that Jesus would deliver him from evil and award him that crown of righteousness. In fact, Christ crucified gave meaning and importance to all the other possible answers we had considered before this point.

Paul's conversion experience had meaning and could provide certainty because Paul had been baptized into Christ crucified. Paul's apostolic work mattered because it had been done in the name of Christ crucified, and nothing done in the Lord (whether a success or a failure by worldly standards) is done in vain. Paul had the certainty that in Christ crucified all his sins and failures were forgiven.

Paul's memories of how the Lord had stood by him in times of suffering mattered because they were further expressions of the gracious care God gives now that he is reconciled to us by Christ's death on the cross (Romans 8:32).

Paul's faith mattered because it was faith which clung to Christ and the free gift of righteousness which flows from his cross.

So how could Paul be so sure? Because he knew Jesus Christ and him crucified. And that's Good News for you and me, too, because Jesus Christ was not only crucified for Paul. He was crucified also for the world. He was crucified for every human being who has ever lived. He was crucified for you. And that means that Jesus Christ and Him Crucified is our certainty in life and in death!

In life and in death, we all face uncertainty, just like Paul. But in life and in death, this one fact remains sure: Jesus Christ was crucified for our sins, was raised for our justification, and in him, we have eternal life. Knowing this, we, too, can be sure that he will deliver us from every evil deed, bring us safely into his heavenly kingdom, and award us the crown of life in the resurrection on the Last Day. You can be sure of it. In Jesus' name!

Amen