

THE GOOD FIGHT

(Discourse by John Harrison, Aug. 30, 1908, Put-In-Bay, Ohio. 1908 Convention Report starting on page 14.)

My Dear Friends: I esteem it a great honor as well also as an exalted privilege, to greet you in this first service this morning. We come to you this morning, dear friends, with a message recorded in 2 Tim. 4:6 to 8: "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but to all them also that love his appearing."

These words form a part of the last charge of the great Apostle to the Gentiles, to his son in the gospel, Timothy. They form a glorious climax to one of the greatest lives recorded in the annals of men. The Apostle Paul had few peers and but one superior, the Lord Jesus Christ whom he served. I think I voice the sentiment of this vast audience in that statement. We stand and look at this gigantic character, rounded up in these few words, as the crowning piece of his utterances in life, and we stand amazed and wonder how he was able to express the words of the text in saying, "I am now ready to be offered, the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." I say, as we look at this character, we are amazed, and wonder how he attained to that. We look at our own little lives, we measure the common affairs of life as they come to us day by day, and we see the imperfections, the defects that are in us, upon the right hand, and upon the left hand, and we almost fail in heart, and in faith, as we look yonder to the point where the Apostle stood as he gave utterance to the words of the text, and we say, How can I ever attain to such a glorious estate as that? We are forgetful sometimes, I fear, of the way by which this attainment is reached. Paul was not always able to say this and appropriate the words of the text. No, he had his day of conflict, he had his hour of trial, he had his moments of despair. (See 1 Cor. 9:27) Yes, it was by no path strewn with roses that Paul attained unto that estate; it was not by an easy path that he came hither. By no means. It was a rocky road, it was a rough path; there were many besetments upon the right hand, and upon the left hand, and sometimes I fancy the Apostle felt he was almost completely overwhelmed by the Adversary, as he came in like a mighty rushing tide upon his soul in hours of conflict.

When we come to consider the man, when we come to think of the type of the man, we are not surprised that the Lord Jesus set His heart on Him and said, "I have chosen thee as a vessel to the Gentiles. Thou shalt suffer much for me." (See Acts 9:15, 16) The very type of the man is manifested in his pharisaic life, which has much to attract attention; a man of no mean type; a man born in a city by no means a mean city; a man boasting of citizenship, not only as a Jew, but also as a Roman; a man highly educated in the teaching

of his day, brought up at the feet of Gamaliel; a man full of wisdom, of zeal, of understanding, of the things of his day; and he had set his heart and his mind in the execution of that which before God he thought to be right. And so zealous was the man, who afterwards became the Apostle, in defense of the things which in the sight of God he thought to be right, that he persecuted the Saints, even to strange cities. He was diligent in hailing men and women, and bringing them to death. It is a remarkable fact, dear friends, that Saul of Tarsus is the only name recorded in connection with the death of Stephen, the first martyr, for the gospel of Jesus Christ, giving his consent to that death, holding or caring for the clothing of the men who cast the stones which crushed out Stephen's life. This is somewhat of a brief description of the character of the man before he was taken captive by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Smitten down at noon-day, on the way to a strange city to bring men and women to judgment for the faith of the Son of God, blindness is his portion, led by the hand of another, until mercy speaks, and as scales dropped from his eyes, he was to begin to see things anew. It is in regard to this new life that the Apostle speaks in the words of our text, where he says, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course." What kind of a fight? The very words of our text state that it was not by an easy way the Apostle had attained to the altitude of faith, as announced in the text. "I have fought a good fight." This means there was something to contend with, or the fight would not have been on. You cannot fight without an adversary. It is utterly impossible to have a conflict without a foe. And the Apostle recognized that he had them in great numbers. He had mighty forces contending with him, and he sums them up in three classes—the world, the flesh, and the devil—or adversary. Three classes of antagonistic foes confronted this man, who was called from henceforth to be a man of God, a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, a defender of the cross of Calvary. And here was a transformation. What a mighty turning about! And it was from this moment of turning about that course began which he said he had run; it was from the moment he turned in the way, and set his face in the opposite direction from that of a persecutor of the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, that the mighty conflict, which he said he had closed with a good fight, began.

We sometimes in our imagination sit and muse over certain characters, and wonder how they ever made such attainments. And it is for the benefit and special encouragement of our hearts this morning that we call your attention to these things. As we suggested a moment ago, the Apostle Paul did not attain to that altitude of faith and confidence in God at one stride, nor did he attain it by many strides of easy processes, but it was a life of conflict from first to last, from beginning to end. Yes, a life of conflict. What do we know about the aspirations of Saul of Tarsus as a man? He was a man like other men, as he says himself; he was a man of like passions with us. We want to imagine Paul as one of the brethren among us, of like passions; highly endowed with powers, mental, moral and physical, with all the channels and possibilities of life open before him, a

comparatively young man, and then we may begin to conceive something of the things that confronted him.

Educated in all the intricacies of the law, a man who had been brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, the great and noted teacher in Israel in those days, and thoroughly equipped for the duties and responsibilities of Jewish life, he had something before him to look to, and then he evidently was equipped with the ordinary learning of the sciences, and arts of his day. A goodly heritage evidently was his, if we speak after the manner of men. What might have been his ambition, I dare not say. I can imagine him with aspirations like other men, to attain to a goodly fortune, a goodly earthly estate, for if there was anything that inspired the heart of a Jew it was the hope of a glorious earthly estate, ultimately at the head of all the nations of the earth as to nationality. Paul was only an individual member of that nation who anticipated a place at the head of all nations. Well, would he not have a right to aspire to a goodly estate as a member of his own nation? Yes, he indicates as much in some instances. (See Phil 3:4, 5) How much his heart was set upon that, I know not, and you may not know, but we know one thing, that he sacrificed it; it went out of his life forever. Whatever ambitions he may have had as to the founding or establishing of a home of his own, as is most natural with every man who comes on the face of the earth, I know not. I do not know what Paul's ambitions may have been, or what his aspirations as to the future, with a home of his own, and a family of his own about him, were, but I do know this, that it went out, that it was eliminated, if it ever had a place in his affections; it was cut off forever and left behind as a thing of the past, if it ever was in his affections at all. (See Phil. 3:8). I do not know what may have been his ambitions and aspirations as to his relationship to his nation in an official capacity. You know that men have ambitions along those lines, not only of wealth and of home, but of recognition, in honor preferred by his fellow men. Paul evidently had a right to have ambitions along this line—political ambitions, if you please, aspirations to hold office, standing as one regarded as worthy of trust and confidence by his fellow citizens; and for aught I know, his ambitions may have been very much along that line; but I know this, that it was eliminated. Yes, he tells us in one place his estate was a goodly one. He says, I have counted it as nothing—counted it all as dross—For what? For the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and for the glory of God. What a wonderful triumph that was! Simply to get the consent of the mind to cancel every ambition, every hope, every desire of the human heart for the things that naturally belong to it, is in itself a mighty conquest, and few there are who are able to make it.

I want to say to you, dear friends, this morning, few there are who are able to make such a complete sweep of the things of earth as the beloved Apostle Paul seems to have done when he entered upon this race, and that is one of the secrets of his success in running the race. This is the very foundation stepping stone of the glorious triumph, announced in the words of our text this morning. The fact that he eliminated out of his life and set aside all the ambitions of an earthly type was the very foundation stone on which he

built his life afterwards, recognizing the fact that it was done for Christ's sake alone. Not many men can measure to the altitude of character simply to say, "I am dead with Christ; dead to the world." But as I have studied this character, in the light of his own writings, and in the testimony of other writers, I have said, this Paul of all men, seems to be able to say with truthfulness, "I am dead with Christ, crucified to the world, and made alive unto God." Just then began the greatest conflict in bringing the powers of being into subordination to the will of God, for when he had accomplished this work of eliminating self, and putting Christ in command, then began the battle. Do you remember what he said? It is in the 8th chapter of Romans: "For the law of the spirit of life in Jesus Christ has made me free from the law of sin and death." What a wonderful recognition of fact! But how had he been led to experience this reform from the law of sin and death to the law of life, which is in Christ? Why that must have been attained by a marvelous grasp of faith in the mind.

Now, my friends, I am wondering this morning if there are not some here who can sympathize in experience with Paul. When you first heard of this way, did you fall in with it easily, or were you inclined to persecute it somewhat? I think I know of one at least who was not inclined to accept it cheerfully. I presume I speak the experience of many others. Well, then you can have some sympathy with Paul when he got his eyes open finally to the fact that all these days of earnest, zealous persecution of the Saints were in direct antagonism to the God whom he thought he had been worshipping and serving acceptably. What a wonderful conflict of soul there must have been in the mind, as he turned thus about and recognized the fact.

Pardon me for a little personal experience, but I have had so much joy in this experience of Paul that I cannot refrain. For some months, after withdrawing from the Methodist Church, in which I had been a minister for something over thirty years, I met some of my personal friends and relatives according to the flesh; they looked at me in amazement; they said to me, in familiar words, "Why John, have you been wrong all your life in your preaching?" I said, "I think so." "Well, it is funny that you would be wrong all your life, and not know it, and just find it out now." It may have seemed funny to them, but it was a very serious matter to me. And they seemed to think it was a remarkable thing that a man would acknowledge he was wrong when he saw it. That seemed to be one of the most peculiar features of the whole affair, with them; and they wondered how it was that a man could preach for more than thirty years, and then acknowledge he had been wrong. "Well," I said to them, "I have a most remarkable example in the person of the Apostle Paul. Paul had been zealous, O, so zealous for what he thought was right, even to the persecution of the Saints unto death, and then he stood up, like a man, in the presence of his environments, and said, 'I have been wrong, and I am going to turn about.' If Paul could endure such a thing as that, I guess I can; he is a pretty good example, and not, by the way, bad company to be in at all." And I am so glad that God, my heavenly Father, and my blessed Saviour, enabled me to take that stand, and that I am here today in that

glorious environment, in the hope of one day, with Paul, being able to say, “I have fought a good fight.” Praise the Lord for the prospect that lieth before every honest child of grace who is willing to put his trust in Him implicitly, even though it does cost friends.

Now, do you not suppose it cost Paul something when he came to the conclusion that he had been wrong during all of these weeks and months and years that he had been persecuting Christ and His followers? Yes, friends, it cost him perhaps more than it cost you or me, but he did not flinch. No, he said, “I count these things as but offal that I may win Christ.” And then you remember that remarkable statement when the brethren entreated him that he should not go up to Jerusalem again, how his soul waxed earnest under the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ which is always available unto those who put themselves wholly into subjection to it—you remember how, when they entreated him, and he was about to depart from them, and did not expect they would see his face any more, he said, “I know not what is before me, I do not understand other than this, the holy Spirit witnesseth to me continually that there waiteth me bonds and afflictions and stripes.” And on one occasion, he said “I even go bound in spirit to Jerusalem.” And yet he was willing to go. Though the Apostle to the Gentiles, he could not forget his brethren in the flesh, and he yearned for them; and in one instance he declared that he could wish himself to be accursed from Christ that Israel, his brethren in the flesh, might be saved.

Fight? Yes, a terrible fight, a fearful conflict! He got rid of all the ambitions of the flesh, and the desires of the earthly, and then began his antagonism with the world, and the great adversary of souls. Do you remember what he said he had endured at different times? (See 2 Cor. 11:23-33) In perils by land, in perils by sea, in perils in the world, and perils of false brethren; three times he received forty stripes, save one, at the hands of the Jews, his own brethren, for whom his soul was crying out intently that they might be saved, and yet they spared not, but poured upon him the stripes. And yet we do not find murmuring or complaining, nothing of the kind. These are some of the things he endured; these are some of the things he suffered.

But I presume the hardest conflict of his life, and we find in our own, is the conflict with false brethren, those who have supped with us; those who have shared some of these wonderful things that our Father has, in his gracious abundance provided for us. I say there, perhaps, was the hardest conflict the Apostle had to endure—perils among false brethren. I do not mean his Hebrew brethren; I do not speak of his brethren according to the flesh, but his brethren according to the spirit; for these seem to be they of which the Apostle was speaking. And I want to say to you, dear friends, as I go up and down the earth, in my pilgrim travels, there is nothing that so touches my heart and so saddens my soul as to come in contact with one who was once in full unison along lines of faith, and to see that he is getting out here, a deflection to the right hand, or a deflection to the left, something he has found that he thinks is better than the best he ever had before; and yet when we come to look at it, and compare it with the gracious record of God’s Word, we

find oftentimes that it is completely antagonistic, and, to say the least, out of harmony with the record of the Word. And then when we see those actively engaged in disseminating this bitterness, this bad food, among others and striving to lead them astray, just as Paul evidently felt towards those of his day whom he declared to be false apostles transformed into apostles of Jesus Christ, so our hearts are sad when we meet with such. I presume that was among the causes of the greatest grief and the deepest sorrow of the Apostle's heart in remembrance of that fact. Why? Not simply because of the severance of fellowship between his own soul and their souls, but because of the danger he saw in advance in connection with that thought which he suggests in one place, and says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, for our God is a consuming fire." (Heb. 12:29) And he said that would be the lot of those who had thus departed from the faith, and were seeking to destroy the faith of others, and so we have like experiences along our race course. But, dear friends, time flies when we get to talking of these things, which are of such vital interest to us.

I want to call your attention for a moment to another thought for the special encouragement of those this morning who feel they need encouragement because of their own weaknesses, infirmities and insignificance in the race course. Now, I meet in little groups here and there, up and down in the earth, and it is no unusual thing for me to meet with one who will begin to complain, and say, I do not see how I can ever be an overcomer, how I can ever win the prize. Well, I sometimes ask this question: sister, or brother, Who put you into this race? Is it your own choosing? I remember that our Master said, "Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you," (See John 15:16) Now sister, brother, who put you into the race? by what authority are you there? Well, it must be admitted that it was the Lord, if they are in the race at all. Then why are you complaining against God, the Father, who put you in there? That is the question. I would have everyone settle who is discontented or dissatisfied with the race. I think perhaps there is a little difficulty right here. Instead of settling it as Paul evidently did, they look at somebody else; they look at a brother or sister over there, concerning whom they think it is an easier matter for them, and say, "If I had their place, I think I could run it a little better." That is a grievous mistake for anyone to make. Our heavenly Father knew you before he called you. He knew all about you; He knew just how crooked and knotted and gnarly the stick was before He had it cut out of the forest. But I want to tell you, He knew something else; He knew exactly where He wanted that stick—or that stone, which would probably be a better figure—to fit; and He knew if you were submissive in His hand, He could easily shape you as a living stone to fit an exact place or niche in the Temple builded up under Christ, that would be to His glory. Now the only question is, Will you let Him do it? Or will you go to dictating to Him how it shall be done, or when it shall be done? It is for you to settle, too, I cannot settle it for you, I could not run your race, to save my life, and I do not believe you could run mine. I think our heavenly Father understands the whole situation as no other one does. He understands thoroughly what was in Paul when He called him, and He knew just what place He had for Paul to

fit, and so He had for you and me the same knowledge, and the same thought in mind when He called us, and asked us to be submissive in His hand for the polishing and fitting.

Therefore the exhortation is, “Take heed, let no man take thy crown.” It is yours—assigned to you—and if you do not want it, do you know what God will do? I will tell you what has been my thought on that. He will hunt out of the quarry of humanity another stone as nearly like you as it is possible to find two alike. What for? Because He must have one to fit the place. God help us to recognize this fact, and, Paul-like, first eliminate out of our lives every ambition, every desire, every motive, that would leave the least flaw on our new creature—let it all be eliminated and cast out, and like Paul may we be enabled to say, “Forgetting the things that are behind, I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling which is of God in Christ Jesus.” And I want to say to you, dear friends, it is my candid opinion that no soul will ever be able to stand where Paul stood when he uttered the words of the text until he has done that one thing—cut out everything from the life that would in any wise claim a place in the affections, the desires, or the ambitions of life. It costs something to do it, but it pays the largest dividends possible when the work is accomplished. Thank God for the fact!

And then what? Why, we must not only have ourselves liberated from that which is binding us, but there must be there the pressing forward. If Paul had stood there where he had eliminated these things, he never would have been where his experience declares him to be in the text of this morning. Press forward—it costs something. Here is a great antagonist to the right; but don’t you know our path does not go to the right? It is straight forward. Too many of us want to get out into the road instead of keeping in the narrow path. The lions are not in the path. No, they are chained off, over there, and over there, and it is only when we get outside the narrow way of duty that we have the greatest trouble. Our Lord Jesus Christ traveled from beginning to the end the path you and I are expected to go over. He knows all about it.

I used to wonder how it was that Christ was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin. That was when I was a Methodist preacher. Why did I wonder that? Well, I thought Christ was perfect, and I knew I was not perfect, and I wondered how a Perfect being could be tempted in all points as an imperfect being is tempted. Now, you see I had not studied the Bible very much, don’t you? I will tell you brethren, I had studied what men had said about the Bible more than I had studied the Bible, and that is the secret of trouble in all these great camps of Babylon. What was the trouble? I was not acquainted with the Word of God. Had I been, I would have known that the temptations of the Lord Jesus Christ were not upon the plane of a man, but consecrated humanity brought a new condition of things, and it was on the plane of the New Creature that He was tempted as we are, yet without sin. He was tempted in all points as we are, as New Creatures. When I saw that, I began to have some hope. I began to see I had a Saviour that to me was

unparalleled in relationship to anything I had ever dreamed of before. In all points tempted as we are as New Creatures, and therefore He is able to succor us as New Creatures, and we need have no worry. Those lions on the way cannot come near us as long as we are hid under the covenant relationship with God in Christ. He is our righteousness; He is our shelter; He is our protection. And you remember He gives us that beautiful picture of the hen and chickens, in what He says to Jerusalem; and what He promised to Jerusalem, if they had been willing, is ours, and more too, if we are willing. Don't you remember? "As a hen gathereth her brood under her wings, so would I have cared for your children, but ye would not." (Matt. 23:37) Now, I hope it will never be said of any of us that we will not. What a wonderful sheltering place that is against all the powers of the adversary; all the fiery darts of the enemy fall harmless and ineffective at the feet of Him who is thus sheltered and protected under the cover of His wings. Thank God!

Now let us look again, just a little along the same line. We had stood many times, evidently all of us, and looked at this wonderful character, so marvelously rounded out, as in the words of our text this morning, and we have said, Will it be possible for me to attain unto that estate? I do not know; I have for some years thought this was one of the special mercies of our heavenly Father, in permitting this royal soldier of the cross to have such a glorious experience in the closing hours of his life. Evidently the Apostle Paul had had his last trial in a Roman court, evidently he had been sentenced to be executed. If there is any dependence to be placed in tradition we are informed that he was beheaded, and I have thought that before penning the words of our text he had passed through the ordeal of his last trial in a Roman court, and had been sentenced to be executed, and was apprised of the fact, and in reviewing his life, and looking at the sheltering of the blood of the covenant that had been over him from the day that he entered into covenant relationship with God in Christ Jesus, his soul was permitted to see out into the future, as well as retrospectively over the past, and he was enabled to say, "I am ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. No more conflicts, no more besetments, no more trials, no more doubts, all is clear and serene before me, I am ready to be offered." God help us to be ready when the time may come. We know not how soon it may be, for you or for me. We may not have the warning that Paul had, but let that be as it may, when and where it will, whatever God may see is best; but let us be able every day of our lives to say, "I am ready now to be offered, and the day of my departure is at hand; I have fought a good fight." It has been a fierce one—it was a fearful one, Paul might have added, but it has been accomplished, the victory is now mine. I was able to say back yonder, "I count all things but dross that I may be able to win Christ, and I see now the goal is reached, and I am ready, there is nothing more to be done, I await only His time; I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith."

O, brother, sister, what crowning glory in these words—"I have kept the faith"! Faith of what? The faith of the Son of God, faith in the atoning merit of the Redeemer, faith in a risen Christ, faith in a coming Messiah, faith in a coming Kingdom, in which I hope to have a place, said the Apostle. Glory be to God for such a prospect! I reach out, with the fingers of faith, and take hold of it, and claim it as mine, and you claim it as yours, as the privilege I believe of every anointed Son of God and child of grace. Thank God for the outlook! Therefore he could say, Not that I expect the crown now, but henceforth, in the future, in due time, the Lord, the Righteous Judge, will give it to me in that day. What day? This day. Thank God, this day. It was that day to Paul. Paul told of things that would come upon us in the ends of the ages, but oh! what wonderful things we see today as we look back to the ends of the ages there, we upon whom the ends of the ages have come here.

The ends of what ages? Why, the last end of the age which Paul knew the first end of. We are in the ends of the ages. As Paul stood in the ends of the ages, the last end of the Jewish age and the first end of the Gospel age, so we stand in the last end of the Gospel age, and the first end of the Millennial age. What wonderful things! Will it not be glory when the last member is gathered, and we see some of the things Paul saw when he was caught up to the third heaven and heard things unutterable, things not lawful to be spoken at that time? But oh, thank God, many of them are lawful to be spoken now, and you and I can talk freely about them, and anticipate them in their ultimate fulfillment. And it seems to me that just a little beyond, only a little way, we will see and hear and talk and rejoice in all of these things that Paul saw back there in the other ends of the ages,—not in these. God help us to be ready, having fought a good fight. Paul said, The Righteous Judge will give it to me in that day. And when we get through with this little harvest work that God has assigned to us, we will receive it in this day. What a glorious fact! What a stimulus for our faith! What a wonderful support for our confidence! May our confidence grow stronger, and our faith grow brighter, and our hope grow firmer, and our rest in Him become sweeter, as the days go by! Amen.