

Faith Pulpit

My Swan Song

What does one say when one is about to depart from the institution that he has loved and served for 41 years? Is there a Scriptural text that deals with that subject? Yes, there are several. In the O.T., Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and David each gave a farewell address. In the N.T., Peter and Paul both wrote of their impending death in their final epistles. One's final message is sometimes called a "swan song," a term based on an ancient belief that the swan knew the hour of its death and announced it with a great cry or sweet song. Although I do not sing, still I can identify with Paul in his "swan song" found in 2 Timothy 4:1–8.

I. Paul is an example of one who has finished the course (vv. 6–7).

Four thoughts crossed Paul's mind as he ended his epistle.

A. Paul believed that his death was imminent.

6For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. Paul was speaking of his impending martyrdom as an offering to God. He recognized that death, "my departure," was imminent. I do not feel that martyrdom awaits me, nor do I feel that death is necessarily near, but I do identify with Paul in that my ministry is coming to an end. I could paraphrase the verse: "For I am now ready to retire, and the time of my 'being put out to de pasture' is at hand." The big question for me has been, "How do you know when it is time to retire?" I have had no experience in quitting a job before. However, because of my age, my lagging energy, and my wife's health, I am retiring from full-time teaching at the end of this academic year.

B. Paul believed that his fight was fought.

7I have fought a good fight. Paul waged a constant battle. He overcame all opposition. The book of Acts and 2 Corinthians 11 record some of the battles that Paul encountered. He bore the scars of battle, but over all he was victorious. He left to us all an example of a soldier of Christ who became “all that [he] could be” in his service to God. At this point, I will leave it to others to judge how good a fight I have fought.

C. Paul believed that his course was completed.

I have finished my course. Paul’s course or race ended in a Roman prison awaiting the executor. What a race he had run! I find no greater hero among humans than Paul. His race was not easy. By comparison, my course has been easy. God has given me a delightful course to run, and I have already been honored as I finish this race. I have loved teaching at FBBC&TS. I have never wanted to go to another school. I don’t believe I could have been happy in another school. It has been a good run. I teach Bible and theology, the core curriculum of a Bible college—and they pay me to do it! Figures supplied by the alumni department suggest that I have taught over 5,600 students. I have taught many second-generation students, and at least five third-generation students. To me, it is “proof of the pudding” when graduates send their kids back home, to their own alma mater.

D. Paul believed that the faith was kept.

I have kept the faith. In all of Paul’s struggles, he never renounced or turned from the faith. For 41 years I have taught Bible and theology at this school. I leave this institution still holding to the truths that I held when I joined this faculty. I have taught a couple of courses nearly 80 times. A student once complained that I had not changed, that I taught him the same as I had taught his father. I took it as a compliment, although I am not sure he meant it to be a compliment. My notes have been upgraded (thanks to computers), but the content is largely the same. Truth does not change. What was truth when I taught the father is still truth when I teach the son. I once read of a university graduate returning to his alma mater many years after he graduated. He found his old sociology professor grading some exams. He noted that the exam contained the exact questions that were asked him years earlier. “Prof,” he said, “these are the exact same questions you asked us years ago.” “True,” the professor agreed, but quickly added, “The answers have changed since you took the class.” Not so with the Bible and theology that I have taught here. I came in as a Baptist, I leave as a Baptist. I came as a Premillennialist, I leave as a Premillennialist. I came as a dispensationalist, and leave as such. My position concerning the integrity of the Scripture remains the same. I do believe I can defend my position better after 41 years of teaching, but my position remains the same because truth remains truth. I believe that I have kept the faith.

II. Paul gives an exhortation to those who have not finished the course (vv. 1-5).

Although Paul had finished his course, there were others who were still on the track, and to them he passed the torch. They must also keep the faith. Paul addresses Timothy in the opening verses of the chapter.

A. The passage addresses what needs to be done.

I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom. This exhortation is given by Paul to those who would carry on the ministry after his death. These final instructions express Paul's concern for what must continue to be done. The exhortation is solemn. It is serious. It involves the Father; it involves the Son. It involves the judgment of all men; it involves the kingdom. It is more than good advice. It is a command. The charge involves nine exhortations or commands, each fuel enough for a full-fledged sermon: *2Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine 5But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.* The concern that Paul expressed to Timothy is the concern that I have for our school as I step aside. May FBBC&TS continue to prepare students who will accept wholeheartedly these admonitions. I rejoice when I hear of our graduates who are faithfully serving the Lord. John wrote, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 Jn. 3). My joy comes in hearing that my former students walk in truth.

B. The passage explains why it needs to be done.

3For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; 4And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. The charge that Paul gave was necessary because he knew how sinful man would respond to truth. Three areas are addressed. (1) Sound doctrine would be rejected. Sound doctrine infringes upon man's lifestyle. Paul saw that happening in his own day. He knew it would continue. (2) False teachers would be sought. He foresaw the "seeker friendly" philosophy of ministry. There are always teachers who will give man what he wants. (3) Truth will be replaced. Fables will replace truth. Fallen man would rather hear the contrived ideas of sinful man than the revealed truth of God.

The charge that Paul gave before his death remains relevant today. My concerns for FBBC&TS are the same as those expressed by Paul to Timothy. May our school be a defender of sound doctrine. May we reject all false teaching. May we turn our backs to fables and may we diligently adhere to the truth. We have no reason to exist if we fail in these matters. But, if we are faithful, there will be a reward for us as seen in the next verse.

III. Paul shares an expectation for all who do finish the course (v. 8).

A. An aged apostle awaited the crown.

8Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness. One would expect that Paul, the great warrior of the faith, would have many crowns awaiting him, and surely this is true. The crown of righteousness is but one of the rewards that Paul anticipated. Now that his course was finished, he awaited the crowning just as the winner of a race awaits the awarding of the medals.

B. A righteous judge will dispense the crown.

Which the Lord, the righteous judge shall give me The chapter began (verse 1) with a reference to the Lord who will judge the quick and the dead, and it closes with a reference to the righteous Judge who will give the crown. He is not a biased Judge, nor One who can be bribed, nor One Who can be misled into awarding those who do not deserve to be awarded. He can be trusted to do right. He will be just in His dealings with His own.

C. An appointed day is set for awarding the crown.

Shall give me at that day. When is that day? For the believer, this day is associated with the rapture of the church. Note again the opening verse of the text. It closes with a reference to his kingdom. That day looks forward to the judgment seat of Christ, the next event to occur after the rapture.

D. A longing people will share the crown.

And not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. Imagine sharing a reward with the Apostle Paul. But you can! This reward is for all those who love His appearing. Do you long for the coming of the Lord? Are you “loving” His appearing? If not, could it be because your spiritual life is not in order?

But, until that day, until Jesus comes to claim his bride, may God give FBBC&TS teachers and administrators who teach sound doctrine. May our curriculum be focused on what is needed and not what is wanted. May God give us a board of directors who seek God’s face as they watch over this school. May He give us a student body who will listen with discernment to the truths that are taught. May He give us a constituency that will demand integrity to the Word of God. May this school defy the odds of history and remain steadfast in the faith until Jesus comes. Until that day, may FBBC&TS fight a good fight, finish the course, and keep the faith.

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Dr. Arthur Walton (Th.D., D.Min.) was a respected scholar and educator with a rich background in biblical studies. Throughout his career, Dr. Walton demonstrated a strong commitment to theological education, serving in both academic and ministry settings.

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