

Poured Out, Finished & Waiting

The old apostle was dying. He didn't know if the end would come quickly or slowly but he knew it would surely not be long. Perhaps he would succumb to illness in the cold, dank dungeon where he sat in chains, a far less desirable prison than the commodious house where he'd spent his first imprisonment in Rome. Or he might be summoned back to court at any time to finally hear the death sentence he expected. That could be a more merciful end – out into the sunshine one last time to walk to the place of execution outside the city gates, then the quick stroke of a sword against his neck. That was his due as a Roman citizen. But with Nero Claudius, the Mad Caesar, on the throne, he could not even be assured of that. Nero had begun torturing Christians to death in horrible ways – sending them unarmed into the arena to face wild animals or even making use of them as briefly-living torches for his garden parties, dipped in wax and set alight.

The old apostle was dying, that was certain. And it seemed very possible that he might die alone. Part of it, of course, was his own doing. His assistants Erastus and Trophimus had parted from him on the road on this last journey to Rome. Erastus he had left to work with the ever-troubled church in Corinth and Trophimus had been so sick in Miletus, he'd had no choice but to leave the young man behind to recuperate. He had sent Crescens to Galatia and Titus to Dalmatia to continue the work of building up the young churches there. Tychicus was waiting to go to Ephesus, just as soon as the old man finished dictating the letter so carefully recorded by his doctor, secretary and friend, Luke. But in the panic after his arrest, his other young protégé, Demas, had fled to Thessalonica where he had publicly repudiated the faith in order to escape the building persecution. None of the leaders of the church in Rome had dared to appear on his behalf at the arraignment. Only the grace of God and his own wits and ready tongue had saved him from being sent to his death there and then. But after the magistrate's hesitation in sentencing and as his imprisonment had stretched from days to weeks to... how long had it been, anyway? No matter. Slowly they had begun to come and visit him again, hoping against hope for his release, or at least for a little more time with the old Pharisee-turned-Nazarene. Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia – they were good people, dear friends. It was not their fault that they had been frightened by the brute force of the Empire. He would not, could not hold it against them. And he prayed that the merciful God they all served would not lay it to their charge, either. Surely, he thought, the blood of Christ was sufficient to cover even this sin.

Still, he thought, the loneliness was perhaps the worst part of his imprisonment. Luke was a good friend but he was used to spending his hours teaching the young missionaries who would continue his work in spreading the Good News of God's love through Christ Jesus. What he really wanted, perhaps even more than freedom he realized, was the company of those closest to him: Timothy, who had been like a son to him, and even John Mark. How that young man had changed, he thought, the callow youth who had abruptly left the mission journey when he had accompanied his uncle Barnabas and Paul. What a ruckus it had caused. He and Barnabas had nearly come to blows over it, thought Paul, and he had left on his next journey in a huff with Silas, telling Barnabas and Mark that they could go to Cyprus or go to hell; it was all one with him. But John Mark had grown and matured, becoming a steadfast leader in the Way and a good preacher. Paul was glad that he'd swallowed his pride and reconciled with Mark and with Barnabas, too. People said that Mark had spent hours with Simon Peter, learning his stories and adding to them with memories of Jesus from others who'd actually seen and heard him. He was putting it all down on parchment, they said, and believers in other cities were actually asking him

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for copies of it. Not as good a way to spread the news of Jesus' death and life and teaching as to have the apostles preach it, Paul thought. But there were fewer of the old men and women every year as hardship, persecution and natural lifespans took their toll. Yes, maybe the future of the church was in the parchments that Mark was working on. Paul wondered if Luke was doing something similar. The doctor had always kept notes on their journeys, on his preaching, even the rough copies of the letters that Paul dictated to him. Well, he thought, the Lord was likely to come back before they were all gone anyway. Then the letters and stories would be unnecessary.

If only Timothy could come soon! Perhaps he could gather a few things on his way. It would be so good to have his own copies of the Scriptures to read again, thought the old man. His memory wasn't what it was. David's Psalm of abandonment, the one they said Jesus had shouted from the Cross, had been on his mind a good deal lately. "They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion," he thought sourly, remembering the jeering mob at his arraignment and the threat of the Coliseum. And what was that verse about being poured out? He certainly felt poured out. And perhaps Timothy could fetch his good warm cloak, the one made with wool from sheep that grazed within sight of the Temple. Ah, Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Would he ever see the City of God again? It didn't matter, he thought, suddenly. None of it mattered, really. Not the ache in his old bones or the pain in his chest that cut his breath short from time to time. Not the beasts in the arena or the sword and certainly not Mad Nero. It didn't matter if he was free or in prison. Thanks be to God, God had given him the strength to be faithful to his calling. It was not his own courage, Paul knew that. He had persevered because of Christ, because Christ dwelt in him. And God would be faithful, Paul knew, to bring him home at the end. Not Tarsus, not even Jerusalem, but his true home, at the banquet table of the Lord he loved. The sword could not separate him from his loving God, nor the lions, nor anything on earth. He belonged to God and to God alone, glory to God's holy name!

"Luke," he said, "Come! I want to finish that letter to Timothy." Still, he thought, the cloak would be nice...

OK, so maybe it didn't happen that way. But it certainly could have. The evidence is all in the last verses of II Timothy or in Paul's other letters or Acts or in traditional stories of the early church. What we can know from our passage this morning is that Paul is in prison. He believes he is near the end of his life. And yet, his letter to Timothy, so personal and full of sadness and yearning, is nevertheless also full of hope. It is not a hope for physical salvation but the sure and certain knowledge of spiritual salvation. It is not a hope for some future "pie in the sky by and by when we die," but rather the understanding that God has transformed what seems like a defeat into a victory. When Paul considers a situation that most of us would think of as hopeless suffering, he sees instead the opportunity to prove once again the steadfast love of God. In his online commentary, Dirk Lange of Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, writes, "Paul's vision is directed to what is often called an eschatological hope." Normally, eschatological refers to the end times. But Lange believes that Paul sees the reality of the eschaton, the end of time, in his present situation because the victory of Jesus, which will be completed at the end of time, has already begun. Lange writes, "Eschatological hope is a present hope. It is hope in the present moment that forms, that transforms the "now" in which we live. Eschatological hope is the knowledge that Christ is present today. It "sees" the world with different eyes, with eyes that are not confined by the restrictions of self-interest."

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How can we read this rather sad, perhaps even pathetic, passage as one of victory? Paul begins by saying he is being poured out. Have you ever felt poured out? It's not a very positive image, is it? After the last several busy weeks and some very late nights this week, I'm feeling pretty poured out this morning. Ridden hard and put up wet, as my friends with horses used to say in Texas. But that's just minor griping, really. I can think of other times in my life when I really felt poured out, used up. When I became a motherless child at seventeen, for example, and nearly constantly for the year and a half after that as deaths and disappointments seemed to follow one after another too close to recover. I'm sure that all of us could tell stories of times when we felt poured out – when jobs were lost, when relationships ended, when death took a loved one too soon, when accomplishments turned to ashes.

But let's look a little more closely at what Paul is saying here, because I think the image might be a little deceiving. "As for me," he writes, "I am already being poured out as a libation..." Now that's an odd word, libation. If we use it at all today, we use it in the sense of something to drink, probably what we might euphemistically call "an adult beverage." But in Paul's time, it meant an offering of liquid, usually "an adult beverage," poured out in honor of a god, on the ground, on an altar, or even on a grave, in honor of the deceased. For good Jews like Paul and Timothy, it had an even deeper meaning. In Leviticus and Numbers, we read that a libation, or drink offering, is to be offered to God at times of celebration, in thanksgiving for God's blessings to us. Paul feels poured out but not in such a way that his life has been wasted. No, Paul's life is poured out in gratitude to God and to the Christ who appeared to him on the Damascus Road. When Paul writes to Timothy that he is being poured out as a libation and that the time of his departure has come, it is not a lament. It is rejoicing. In his being poured out, in his completion of the good fight and the race of life, Paul feels gratitude for Christ who has strengthened him to do all things. It is an attitude we would do well to remember when we are feeling "poured out." William Loader writes, "Paul is an inspiration, a mirror in which to see one's own experience, a challenge to stay on course to the end and somehow also to find the peace that comes from simply pouring oneself out without breaking oneself down by feeling one has always to be successful and hold everything together. While pouring out could be an image of resignation, it also suggests a flexibility, indeed, a flowing, where one does not feel one has to run out and pick up all the pieces. Let it flow." Or to quote a saying that I know is meaningful to many of us, "Let go and let God."

I found a wonderful little poem in my research on this passage this week. I believe it is by the Methodist scholar, Safiyah Fosua. It is on the United Methodist Church website that she edits and there is no other attribution. It is called "Living Libation" and it offers a prayer to God that we could all learn to adopt Paul's attitude to life in this regard. Listen:

Make my life a libation / poured out like oil / diffused through air / like perfume / blessing multitudes.

Make me a libation / poured out to God, / not Mother Church, / or someone else's agendas; / an emissary of Christ, / lighthouse and cattle-prod, / good news and conscience-goad, / bringing tidings of peace / and warnings of the wrath to come.

Let me not be sacrificed / on the altar of the church's indifference, / nor let me confuse sacrifice with suffering for selfish gain.

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At the end of my days, / when life on this globe is over, / let it be truthfully said / my life was poured out / for You.

As I pray, I often remember the words attributed to Francis of Assisi, “Make me an instrument of Your peace.” I think now I will also remember the words, “Make me a libation.”

This is such a rich passage. Not only do we learn some of the details of the apostle’s life but we also can read once again the echoes of his transformation from Saul the Persecutor to Paul the Faithful. From that fateful day on the Road to Damascus forward, Paul only understands his life in light of The Light that Shone on him, of Jesus whom he had persecuted. As I mentioned in my fanciful retelling of his situation, Psalm 22 seems much on his mind in this passage. This is a Psalm that came to be understood as a prophecy of Jesus’ crucifixion. I mentioned the references to the lions and to being poured out. The Psalm begins, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” the very words that Paul’s young colleague Mark records Jesus shouting from the cross. That word, “forsaken” or “deserted” is used by Paul when he writes sadly, “At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me.” Then he continues in a tone that also echoes the Crucified One, “May it not be counted against them!” Paul was not present at the crucifixion to hear Jesus say, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing,” but Luke knew of these words of Jesus so it is likely that Paul did, too. He had certainly heard Stephen say something very similar, for he had held the cloaks of the men who had stoned Stephen to death: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

Above all, however, shines Paul’s rock-solid certainty that whatever becomes of him, it will be a victory for God. “From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing... The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever.” Paul doesn’t expect that he will escape suffering but that doesn’t worry him. Not even death worries him. He knows that God will guard the essence of his life, his soul, if you will, and that his great reward will indeed come some day. It is the same spirit that we find in the old Civil Rights anthem, “We Shall Overcome.” Again, it’s not about streets of gold or the pearly gates but about the slow process of redeeming all of creation, the process that begins in the heart of each believer and spreads from human to human, from nation to nation, around the world and, perhaps, across the universe, until Creation reaches its culmination in the completed Beloved Community. I like what the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (a native Missourian, by the way) had to say: “Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore, we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”

Hope, faith, love, forgiveness – these are the things that Paul taught, the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the legacy of Christ Jesus. As we conclude our look at Paul’s letters to Timothy, I can do no better than to quote from the author of my primary resource, the Word Biblical Commentary volume on the Pastoral Epistles, William Mounce. At the end of his book, he writes, “It is difficult, if not impossible, to end this discussion of the Pastoral Epistles... without breaking into

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praise of the God who in his love and mercy saves sinners, even sinners like Paul, and uses them for his purposes. May we be found as faithful as Paul when we meet our final hour.” Amen.