

Our Defense Will Not Fail

October 23, 2016 | 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

⁶ *For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near.*
⁷ *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* ⁸ *Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing...* ¹⁶ *At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.* ¹⁷ *But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth.* ¹⁸ *The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

“Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rage at close of day, Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” This poem by Dylan Thomas expresses the heart of a man staring death in the face. “Do not go gentle” but rage! “Rage against the dying of the light.” Compare these words with the words that flowed from the heart of Paul while he was staring death in the face. They are words that express total confidence in his defense, Jesus. With Paul today, we express the same: Our defense will not fail. Though Satan accuses us, the Lord will stand by us.

I. Though Satan Accuses Us

Paul penned these words sitting in a dark dungeon knowing what was about to happen. The measure of his life, which had once been full and rich, would soon be poured out before the executioner's sword. His hand which might tremble in anticipation penned steady confident words describing two trials happening simultaneously: one before man's court and the other in God's court.

With a few brief words, almost as an offhanded remark, Paul describes the trial that determined his worldly fate: “*At my first defense*,” Paul said, “*I stood alone. No one came to my support, but everyone deserted me.*” These trials were public shows, often times large crowds of people would pack themselves between the marble columns of the high domed ceilings of the majestic Roman Basilicas. Paul, it is reported, stood before the governor of all of Italy: Helius Cæsareanus who served in the stead of Roman Emperor Nero—one of the greatest tyrants in all of history. Out of fear, not one of Paul's friends dared speak in his defense. Why? Because in the year 67 A.D. Christians were public enemy number one of the Roman Empire.

Three years prior to this, Emperor Nero had notoriously set fire to Rome—playing his harp while hundreds of his own people burned to death—all to make way for the construction of a new palace. But Nero needed a scapegoat; someone to take the blame. At that time Christianity, a strange new religion, made the perfect target. Christians who were captured would either be burned alive to light Nero's evening parties or sentenced to face the lions in the Coliseum. Paul's status as a Roman citizen gave him the special privilege of a public trial—a convenient opportunity to witness his faith. A witness that also sealed his fate.

Yet, while on trial in a fixed, corrupted, façade of a human justice, Paul was also on trial in the court above. The very evidence that condemned him in the court below was the basis of his exoneration in the court above: “*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*” Faith trusting in Jesus as its Savior produces good works as evidence of that same faith. Though the world despises us for this evidence, God responds with, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matt 25:21).

If you were standing in Paul’s place, before the same Roman governor, would there be enough evidence to convict you of being a Christian? How many witnesses would be called in to say, “Yes, I heard them! They confronted me with my sin, they told me to trust in Jesus!” Or would they rather say, “No, that one cannot be a Christian; I heard their locker room talk!” “I saw what they watch when no one is looking! I know how they speak about other people behind their back.”

Know that at the same time, in the court above the Accuser, Satan—that roaring lion—uses the same lack of evidence against you in God’s heavenly court: “How can that one be Your child, O God?” “Have they fought the good fight? Not as often as they have waved the white flag of surrender to me. See all the times they gave into my temptations!” “Have they run the race? Not without complaining.” “Have they kept the faith? No!” He roars, “Instead they wait for tomorrow... a day when it will be more convenient. A time where they will not be made fun of for speaking your name!” The evidence brought against us is true. The verdict: guilty. The sentence: condemned to eternal death.

II. The Lord will stand by us

Paul must have felt so alone hearing his own sentence in the middle of that large room with all those condemning eyes staring down at him. Yet despite that, Paul held onto one truth, he was not standing there alone: “*But the Lord stood at my side.*” Though everyone and everything else abandon us in the face of Satan’s fury, God will not. God has taken it upon Himself to be our defense—a defense that will not fail. As Paul himself voiced and our children echoed with confident defiance with our hymn, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31).

Jesus rescues us from the jaws of the lion. Though he seeks to devour us with his ferocious accusations, and the evidence against us is absolutely condemning, Jesus presents evidence to contrary. He holds his hands out for the entire court to see—the nail marks. “See,” Jesus says, “I have evidence too. Evidence that proves that the punishment has already been paid in full.” For all the times that we have failed the good fight, Jesus entered the arena for us as our valiant champion. He took on the lions of hell and overcame. They pierced his hands, side, and feet when Jesus was pinned to the wooden cross. Yet when God raised Jesus from the dead it was his statement that our punishment has been paid in full. The charges of sin brought against us lose their power when we point to Jesus—“See there, my penalty has been paid in full; I am innocent! And my Jesus has the scars to prove it!”

Jesus also stands with us to rescue us from every evil attack. Jesus says, “Do not be surprised when the world hates you, because it hated me first” (John 15:18). Emperor Nero used Christians as his scapegoat for the fire of Rome, and even today Christians bear the blame for the world’s misfortunes. When Christians cry out on behalf of the millions of innocent children killed

through abortion, we are called misogynists for trampling on the rights of women. When Christians defend the Biblical standard of marriage as one man and one woman we are drug into the courts for the crime of “close mindedness.” Christians are targeted and massacred by the thousands around the world, but not one country will lift a finger to help. Yet in all of this, Jesus will rescue us. He will come again. As the righteous judge He will rescue His us from this veil of tears. Then “every mouth will be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God” (Romans 3:19). Therefore we pray with all saints around the world who long for His appearing: “Come!” (Rev. 22:17). “Come quickly Lord Jesus, Come!”

Jesus standing by our side means “*He will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom.*” Even death has nothing on the Christian. As Paul was marched up to his executioner and as he looked at that sword he must have thought, “Where, O Death is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55). Even that vicious looking sword became God’s means of final deliverance for His saint. As his soul poured out, Paul was welcomed into the arms of his Savior who was standing by his side the entire time. Death will come one day for each one of us. It could be a in the form of a car, a lump of cells, a small clot in a blood vein. Jesus’ victory over death is so complete, He has turned death into the means of our final deliverance—He uses death to release us from this world of striving into the peace that lasts for eons of eons—for eternities of eternities. There your Jesus will personally place the victor’s crown on your head.

“Do not go gentle into that good night... Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” Looking death in the face, the Christian does not rage, but welcomes sleep in Jesus name. No, the only ones left to “rage against the dying of the light” are sin, death, and the devil. They will die, we will not. Their time is short, ours is not. Their fate is sealed, you are sealed with the Name of Christ (Rev. 14:1). Let them rage for a time if they will; Jesus, our defense will not fail. Amen.

No sin can now condemn me,
Or set my hope aside.
Now hell no more can claim me;
Its fury I deride.
No sentence now reproves me;
No guilt destroys my peace,
For Christ, my Savior, loves me
And shields me with His grace.¹

¹ Paul Gerhardt, “If God Himself Be for Me” vs. 5 (Christian Worship: 419).