

How A Christian Man Dies

By Steve Burchett



Imagine someone moving across the country to be with you in his or her final days in order to show you how a follower of Jesus dies. That's what happened to singer and author Michael Card. While a student in college, New Testament scholar William L. Lane became his mentor, and they remained close for life. In his book *The Walk*, Card recalls the time at the end of Lane's life when he found out he had cancer, leading him to

move from Seattle to Franklin, Tennessee, to be close to Card.

During the conversation Bill told me why he wanted to spend his last days here. He didn't feel that Seattle was home, even after eight years there. Neither did he want to go back to Bowling Green, even though his years there had been some of the happiest of his life. "I want to come to Franklin," he said. "I want to show you how a Christian man dies" (p. 109).

When the Apostle Paul wrote Second Timothy, his life was almost over — "The time of my departure has come," he told Timothy (4:6). This letter contains his final words to his disciple, urging Timothy, "Share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God" (1:8). The good news of Jesus Christ that Paul loved and proclaimed was to be guarded and advanced now through his "beloved child" in the faith (v. 2). But even as Paul was spending his final days in the Mamertine Prison in Rome, he showed Timothy "how a Christian man dies." In the process, Paul demonstrates how believers should live throughout their lives, not just at the end. What did Paul do?

First, *Paul longed for Christ's return*. His race was over (4:7), so he declared, "Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing*" (v. 8, emphasis mine). The normal hope in the heart of a believer is for Christ to return and for his kingdom to come fully. When this perspective is lost, the consequences are devastating. Just two verses later, Paul mentioned "Demas" who was "in love with this present world." What were the tragic consequences in Demas' life of loving this present age? His ministry was lost, Paul and other believers were harmed, and the Lord was forsaken. Something similar will happen in our lives if we don't cultivate a longing for the second coming of Jesus.

Second, *Paul moved toward fellowship*, not away from it. Paul recognized that a critical means of perseverance, especially when suffering greatly, and even at the end of his life, was more fellowship, not less. Paul told Timothy, "Come quickly, Timothy! I need you!" (paraphrase of

v. 9), and, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry" (v. 11). Some believers, when down, when suffering, or when they simply feel cold toward the Lord, become reclusive. But that is the opposite of what should happen in those situations. We need the very means God has promised to use to revive us and preserve us — the body of Christ.

Third, *Paul clung to the truth*. There's some debate about what Paul means when he writes, "When you come, bring . . . the books, and above all the parchments" (v. 13). Was Timothy to bring legal papers? Blank writing materials? Personal writings? It seems likely that on at least some of these scrolls and parchments would have been Old Testament Scriptures as well as words of Christ and stories about him. If this is correct, we see how critical the truth is in a believer's life, even at the end. Consider how good and helpful it is, then, to go to the hospital room to read Scripture and sing theologically rich hymns to a dying believer.

Fourth, *Paul kept serving*. Even though he was all alone at his "first defense" (v. 16) — a preliminary hearing once in Rome — Paul testified, "The Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it" (v. 17). To the end, Paul declared Jesus to the lost. God's people also benefitted from Paul in his final days. For example, Timothy received this letter. And note Paul's blessing upon the people as he concluded Second Timothy: "The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you" (v. 22). Circumstances may be limiting, but there is always a way to serve the Lord. Here's my best guess: some of the most important ministry done on this earth for God's people and for the progress of the gospel has been accomplished through the prayers of older, sometimes bedridden, oftentimes dying, saints.

Fifth, *Paul relied on Jesus*. He testified about his first hearing in the Roman court: "But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me . . ." (v. 17). And looking forward, Paul declared, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his kingdom." His confidence was in his Savior in life and at death. So if we are going to live for Christ, and die following Christ, we will always need Christ. It's what the hymn writer John Ernest Bode was saying in the hymn he wrote for his daughter and two sons, "O Jesus, I Have Promised" (public domain). Here's the first verse, a fitting prayer for us as we desire not only to honor Christ in our final days, but every day:

O Jesus, I have promised
To serve thee to the end;
Be Thou forever near me,
My Master and my Friend;
I shall not fear the battle
If Thou are by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
If Thou wilt be my Guide.