

But that wasn't the only need. He asked for his winter coat to use during the cold damp nights in that dungeon. As our loved ones finish the race, they'll have physical needs too. Maybe the best place to have those met is at your home. Maybe a nursing home would mean their needs would be a better place. Perhaps hospice is the best solution. We don't want to forget those needs either.

But in all the discussion about comfort and companionship, in one of these seemingly cryptic requests, Paul gets us thinking about an even greater need – God's Word. No, in the text he doesn't say what's on those scrolls or those parchments. Knowing how Paul called God's Word food for the soul and knowing what kinds of things were most commonly written on scrolls in those days, we have a pretty safe guess.

And it is much more than a guess to know how important it is for the believer getting ready to take his or her journey home to be strengthened by God's powerful Word. Can you help a loved one experience the right way to die? Sure you can. Bring them their scrolls. Share God's Word with them. Maybe their prison isn't being separated from the physical book. Maybe it is not having the eyesight or the ability to sit up to read. Bring them their scroll and share God's Word with them for the first or the one million and first time. Remember, Paul wrote a large portion of the Bible and he begged for that Word near his life's end.

In 2 Corinthians 6:2, Paul had told us to take advantage of the opportunities to share the Word we have NOW – and not put it off: **“I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.”** And as the time for death gets closer by the day, we need to have our needs met. So next time you visit that aged relative or you go to the hospital room where the one you love can't even acknowledge that you're there – give them what you can. Meet their greatest need by sharing God's word.

And maybe they won't grab your hand and tell you they're ready to go home. Maybe your visits to a dying loved one may continue longer than expected. But you will be helping them. And, then, one day, with God's help, and by the power of God's Word, you in turn will experience – after having kept the faith and having our needs met – the right way to die.

May God grant it. In Christ, Amen.

Dear Children of God,

What's your death going to be like? Have you ever thought about that? What's the right way to die?

The story goes about Matt, a young minister whose grandfather was dying in a nursing home just down the road from where he lived. Matt seemed to think Grandpa was dying too slowly. For years, the old man had been saying he couldn't figure out why he was still hanging around. He was ready to go and be with Jesus. At the end he couldn't even sit up when the children came by, and sometimes he didn't even seem to notice them at all. At 94, his body was worn out from years of serving his Savior in the pulpit and on the street, in the classroom, even in Vietnam. He was just lying there, waiting... waiting to die.

A few years later this same young preacher met John, decades younger than his Grandpa, but facing that same journey – one hastened by cancer. John hadn't said anything for a number of days, so when he started responding to the pastor's bedside devotion, it came as unexpected but happy surprise. The two of them talked about Romans 8, about no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus that no one can take away. Then John, who was facing that journey so many fear, grabbed the minister's hand and spoke some of his last words: “I'm ready to go home. I'm ready to go home. My sins are forgiven. I'm ready to go home.” And then, before too much longer, he did.

Was that the right way to die? Last week we talked about how important it is to defend the sanctity of life as a gift from God and not let anyone take it out of selfishness or fear. But, let's face it. We do each have to die eventually, unless Jesus comes first. So, it would be good to know how to do it. In God's Word today, the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul at the end of his life to teach us the right way to die.

Our text is the second lesson from Paul's second letter to Timothy. Paul is writing his farewell, and he's writing from prison once again. During his first imprisonment, you might remember, Paul figured he would be released and he talked about being torn, saying, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” But our text shows he has no such expectation this time.

Look at what he says in verse 6: **The time has come for my departure.** And the word he uses there is such a beautiful one to consider as the Christian prepares to be taken on that journey to Jesus' side. Quite literally, it says the time has come for Paul's “untying” – a word used to describe a ship's release from the moorings that held it in port. It's now free to sail. It's also the word used for breaking up an encampment, untying the

tent stakes. The temporary stay here is over. Paul is heading home. That's the right way to die, remembering what it really is – a release.

And as he is ready for this release, notice how he views the life he's lived. He says he's fought the good fight – by never giving up. He's finished the race – and I'm sure some of those Olympic images recall the total effort and complete sacrifice those athletes made to cross the finish line first.

Then, Paul compares his life to a drink offering in verse 6. In Old Testament times, animal sacrifices also required an offering of wine. And that liter or two would be poured out on the ground around the altar as the final action of the sacrifice – given totally to God. That's how Paul sees his life, a total giving over to God.

Now, apply that to how we view our end. We were reminded in last week's message that we don't have the right to take things into our own hands and hasten it in any way – but at the same time, we can each view our life as that offering to God. And if God wants to take it, so be it. The example of the Apostle Paul is a great model for us. We now are given the opportunity to reflect our faith when making these end-of-life decisions and be a faithful witness to others. Our attitudes must be rooted in the belief that God determines the right time for our death, and our role is to glorify Him until that day.

And those decisions are important ones to think about because, as Paul shows us, the right way to die means keeping the faith. It means doing it all according to the faith, the truths we believe that God's Word so clearly shows, the truths of God's view of the value of life regardless of its apparent quality, the truths of God's right and power to control it, the truths of God's love for each of us that put such a high price on our lives. So all of these decisions ought not be made on the spur of the moment in the swarm of emotions, but carefully and prayerfully thought through, like I hope you're doing now during this three-week series. Preparing for end-of-life decisions in faith helps us keep the faith, and guard our own faith from Satan's temptations when we haven't carefully thought through such matters.

And then, Paul shows us, the crown of righteousness awaits. And I know, in evaluating my own life, a crown of victory -- a crown saying I'm perfect – is the last thing I should expect. If you are like me, and you are – you haven't always "kept the faith." You've made decisions disregarding God's will. A little later in the text Paul talks about how a man named Demas deserted him because he loved this world and the things of it too much. For all the times we've put God last and let our greed or our pride call the shots – we might as well call each other Demas, or Judas, or Cain. A crown of righteousness on this sinful head – no way, right?

Actually, Paul's sin list was pretty lengthy too, and he says that he gets a crown. Why? Because it isn't a crown we win. It isn't a crown we earn. It's a crown our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has stored up for us that

He wants to give us, because He earned it. You see, Jesus was poured out like a drink offering, a completely pure and perfect drink offering. He let his sacrificial blood flow all over that altar called Golgotha. He wore the crown of our thorns to give us the crown of His victory.

And Jesus could do that because he ran our race, the course of perfection that we were supposed to run, He finished it. And then, at that great sacrifice of atonement, He declared it finished. Then he bowed his head and gave up His Spirit. But death couldn't keep him. Because our sins were paid for, that crown of thorns became a crown of triumph and He rose to give us each that crown of righteousness that we'll wear the moment we are untied from the moorings of this life and set sail for an eternity of heaven. That's the right way to die, having finished the race we run because Jesus won.

The right way to die means we finish the race in faith. In our text, Paul makes some comments that might seem rather trivial and unimportant at first glance, but we see that the right way to die means having our needs met. So here's where we start thinking about how we can help our loved ones finish their races in faith.

Of course, throughout their lives we'll do all we can to help them run in the faith, but notice what Paul asks for to help him finish in the faith – having his needs met. Let me read that section again, and notice what he asks for – companionship, comfort, and especially the Word.

⁹ Do your best to come to me quickly, ¹⁰ for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹ Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. ¹² I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. ¹³ When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

Paul asks Timothy to come see him. He's in a physical prison. He sends some of his companions to do the work. Some had already deserted him because they felt other things were more important. Paul asks Timothy to come and bring Mark too. He needed others to help him to accomplish the Lord's work.

Do you know someone in a prison? Maybe it doesn't have bars on it, but their sickness, their disability, their age keep them from being able to do much. Have you ever had to wrestle with the question – how often should I visit my relative who can't get out? Does it do any good? Does she even know I'm here? Let Paul remind you of the importance of that companionship and encouragement to keep the faith. Imagine if you were locked in that prison of paralysis and couldn't talk or move, but you could think and hear. How much companionship would you want? Yes, there is work to be done. Paul in fact sent Timothy and Crescens out to do work. But there is also that need for companionship.