

Keeping and finishing (Ezra 8)

Part 1

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[00:00:00] And so you can go on. Moses was given the job of taking the children of Israel out of Egypt. And despite the fact that he could sing of the end that God had in view, he could not bring them to it. He saw it, but he didn't enter in. Joshua took the people in, but he couldn't put down all the enemies.

Moses, who I think we can from scripture say was the greatest man in the Old Testament, he couldn't go in.

The meekest man in all the earth spoke inadvisedly with his lips. Joshua, as I have said, couldn't put out all the enemies.

[00:01:10] God raised up David, a man after his own heart, but he was a man of blood.

And whilst he could deal with the enemies, he couldn't bring in and sustain the peaceful glory of a kingdom. God gave it to Solomon, the wisest man of all the earth, and he had a very foolish heart that was easily turned aside. And so you could go on, until you come to a man like Daniel, or a man like Ezra, or a man like Nehemiah, and you see a difference. [00:02:03] Scripture does not recall that they failed. They carried out the work that God gave them to do, and they finished it. Or, until you turn over the page to the New Testament, and immediately you have a change. A man like John the Baptist appears, who completed the work that was given him to do, and he sealed it with his life. All the twelve apostles, who whilst Scripture may not record it all, I think we know from history, all died as martyrs. And none of them failed in regard to the commission that was given them to do. I'm not saying they had not failure in themselves. [00:03:01] But they completed the work that God gave them to do.

Or whether we go, as we have read, to an apostle Paul. We've read his words. I have finished. I have kept. Therefore, all we have read of his commission to that younger man, Timothy, I charge thee, keep what has been committed to thy trust.

And we can follow down the line, as he was said, teach others also, faithful men, who in their day can teach others also.

I think that's just about where we should come in. Do we? Do we?

[00:04:12] At the end, we turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, who as a man was given the greatest work that

ever a man was given. Who in the power of his person, and in the power of his love, at the end of his life, said with the finality of eternity, it is finished. I have completed the work that thou gavest me to do.

And so you can trace a line right through scriptures, that ultimately brings us to the perfect servant. It leaves you and I, in our day, with the challenge, very, very largely, that Paul passed on to Timothy.

[00:05:13] One of the old writers likens it to a relay race, where there are various stages of different, if you like, generations of runners. Paul had received his baton, and he ran his bit of the race, and he said, I finished it, and he passed the baton on to Stephen. Who, I think, probably finished his course as well, although scripture doesn't speak of it. But he was instructed to teach others also, faithful men. And so he passed the baton on, and those faithful men, in their day, passed the baton on to the others also. [00:06:11] You see, the Spirit of God has in mind a continuance of the truth of God, right to the end. And mark you, dear brethren, it will be continued, right to the end. Philadelphia goes right on to the end.

Because of the presence on earth, in the church, of a divine person, the Holy Spirit, let us be assured, that in this world, the truth of God will be maintained to the end. There's no question about it. We may look abroad and get bogged down with the failure, and our own part in it. But let me say again, the Spirit of God will maintain a testimony to Christ, [00:07:07] and will maintain the truth of God, as was given to his apostles at the beginning, right to the end. Our question is, will you and I be numbered amongst those, whom the Lord at the judgment seat will be able to say, well done, good and faithful servant.

That pretty well encapsulates what I want to speak about. I read to you part of the eighth chapter of Ezra. Illustratively, the beginning of recovery, the bringing back, [00:08:05] the re-establishment of God's people in God's land, the rebuilding of the temple, the recommencement of temple services, the place where God's name was placed.

Under the good hand of God, the edict went forth, the commandment was given. And where we read, we broke into that point where Ezra separated twelve of the chief priests, and said to them, you are holy unto the Lord, and the vessels are holy.

[00:09:01] Let's just very quickly notice that point, because it's absolutely vital. If you handle holy things, you must be holy yourself.

Apply it practically to the present day. If you teach the truth of God, you must hold it yourself. What you handle must characterise what you are.

Otherwise, the enemy will gain an advantage.

The Lord Jesus said, I am altogether that which I say unto you.

In a very large way, the Apostle Paul could say, follow me. As I follow Christ, you get the gist of what I am saying. [00:10:03] To be able to keep and safeguard what in the sight of God is vitally precious, you have to be of the same character of those things that are committed to you. When Paul referred to Timothy, and the charge that he gave to him, he referred to his own manner of life.

Why did he do that? Because his manner of life was an embodiment and an expression of the truth that he taught.

Did you notice? They weighed the vessels. They weighed the gold and the silver into their hands.

And they set forth on that long journey.

[00:11:04] Good old Ezra, he didn't ask for a guard of soldiers. It was offered to him.

You don't need exterior help, brethren, to maintain the truth. Ezra looked to his God. And that's the only place that we can look, if we are to maintain what God has committed into our hands. And they carried those golden vessels all the way back to Jerusalem. And after they'd been at Jerusalem for four days, they weighed them again. They weighed them out, and they weighed them in. There was nothing missing.

There was nothing missing. Because those treasures of the house of God had been committed into the hands of holy men of God, [00:12:01] who were separated to God and were empowered of God to keep what was committed to their trust.

Remember the little expression and apply it to ourselves. The treasure was weighed out, and it was weighed in.

Now you think about it. Mr. Preacher, you think about it.

It's been weighed in the presence of God, what was given to me. And what God has given you was weighed.

And dear brother, dear sister, dear speaker, it will be weighed at the judgment seat of Christ. [00:13:01] Will there be anything lacking?

This is all untrue.

Have we lost what God gave us?

Have we not kept it? Have we not guarded it? Have we not taught it? Have we not passed it on to others also?

It's being done somewhere in the world, and it will be assessed at the judgment seat of Christ. We've read the words of that man who could honestly say before God, I have kept the faith.

I have finished my course. Therefore, there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness [00:14:06] which the righteous judge shall give me.

Paul didn't seem to have any doubts in his mind about the matter of what had been given to him being weighed out and being weighed again at the judgment seat. He didn't seem concerned about it.

He rather rejoiced.

And he didn't finish the matter there because he said in effect, what is true of me can be true of you.

And what was true of Paul as a bond slave, as a man, not as an apostle of course, [00:15:03] or what was true of Stephen?

Or what was true of a Mr. Darby? Or a Mr. Kelling?

Or what was true perhaps of men that many of us looking round in this room have had the privilege of sitting under their ministry? Men that we admire. Men that taught us the scriptures. Not only taught it, but shew it to us in their lives. But here we are. The baton has been passed on to you and I.

Is it still what it was at the beginning?

I find that, beloved brethren, a tremendously serious challenge to my own heart today.

[00:16:11] I've been in the meetings 45 years. 48 actually.

I've had the privilege of listening to men of God. I've had the privilege, like many of you in this room, of reading the ministry of men who in the 1800s were used of God to recover the truth of the assembly, the hope of the church, the rapture, the appearing.

Our bookshelves are full.

At least I trust they are. If they're not, well there's a brother in the meeting who'll help you out on that problem. [00:17:03] But I hope they're not just in your bookshelves. I hope you've read them. I confess I can't say I've read all of the 33 volumes of Mr. Darby's collected writings because I haven't. But they're there if needed. But the question is, beloved brethren, is it on the bookshelf or is it in your heart? Is it in your life? Has it formed you? Because if it hasn't, you'll never keep it. The only way to keep the truth of God is to live it. They're not my words, but it's true.

You cannot keep the word of God theoretically. You can only keep the truth practically. You may acknowledge it theoretically, [00:18:02] but it's the practice that tells how true the truth is as received with power into the soul.

I'd better hurry on. Arthur did pinch four minutes, mind you.

Paul's words to Timothy. I don't need to say very much because the scriptures themselves should, I trust, come home to the soul. Look at verse 11 of chapter 6 of 1 Timothy. But thou, O man of God.

Is it six in the Old Testament? You'll correct me, I'm sure, if I'm wrong. But only one in the New Testament. A man of God.

[00:19:02] We are told that in the Old Testament, a man of God appeared when the people of Israel had departed from the truth.

A man of God appears in a dark day.

So you can see quite clearly why Timothy was addressed as a man of God.

It was a dark day.

But he had the qualifications to be addressed as a man of God.

He was encompassed with infirmity and difficulty, and if you read the second letter, it's obvious that he'd been affected by it. You just listen to this for a moment, and you can understand why Timothy had been affected in his spirit by what had happened in the testimony. [00:20:02] Paul was in prison.

All in Asia had turned away from the teaching of the apostle Paul. Dishonourable vessels had crept in.

Perilous times were soon coming.

Sound doctrine was no longer acceptable amongst those who professed the name of the Lord. And some, like Demas, had given it all up and gone into the world.

It's enough to break anybody's heart.

It's enough to break anybody's heart.

And I know that Paul was very sympathetic to Timothy, because he was mindful of his tears. [00:21:04] But he was not just sympathetic to Timothy's tears. He prayed for him. Die. Die out.

Thank God for brethren who pray day in and day out.

I'm very thankful that I can recall being aware of a dear sister who I know prayed for me every day of her life. And when she died, I felt the lack of it.

It's true, you know, brethren, we sometimes don't realise the value of a thing until we lose it. And some of us have experienced the truth of that very, very much of late.

We didn't value what we had. [00:22:01] And as a consequence, we may have lost it. How did Paul address himself to Timothy?

He said, I charge you in the sight of God, who preserveth all men, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession. Words of sympathy, indeed.

But words of power, of challenge.

He says, God has not given us the spirit of cowardice, but of power, and of love, and of wise discretion. He says, Timothy, stir up the gift of God that is in you. You see, it had flagged a bit. It needed blowing into a flame. [00:23:03] And that's what Paul was doing, particularly in the second letter to him. But he had said just at the end of his first letter, Oh, Timothy.

Can you not detect something pathetic in that?

Oh, Timothy, keep the entrusted deposit.

Keep it, the entrusted deposit.

The truth of God that Paul received uniquely as the minister of the glad tidings to the Gentiles, [00:24:01] and the truth of the Church in its relationship to a glorified Christ at his head, and the relationship between every believer on earth as members of that one body, the indwelling power of the Spirit of God, and the hope of the coming of the Lord. It was an absolute treasure to Paul. He valued it.

He was conscious that he had been entrusted with it, to bring out the truth of it, and to pass it on. He was in prison.

Thank God that Paul was in prison. He thanked God himself, you know. He says, it's for you Gentiles. I'm not a prisoner of Nero, I'm a prisoner of Jesus Christ. [00:25:05] He wanted the Philippians to know that his circumstances had turned out rather for the furtherance of the glad tidings. And so he rejoiced in his imprisonment.

I said, with all respect brethren, what a man. What a man he was.

But what a servant of Jesus Christ.

Let me move on to his second letter. I think it was only written about three years later. But what a change had happened in those three years. He'd left Timothy at Ephesus, which we might view as the pinnacle of Paul's teaching. The truth of Christ glorified, and that body complete, [00:26:01] that vessel that is competent to be his companion in the administration of God's glory as far as the earth is concerned. The fullness of him who filleth all in all. What a pinnacle.

And he says, Timothy, stay at Ephesus to make sure that nobody teaches anything else. That's the gist of his first letter.

It's remarkable, as our brother referred to it this afternoon, that first letter largely contains the truth of the elements and the responsibilities of the house of God. It's only mentioned three times in the New Testament, but I'll not digress. Three years later, a great departure had happened.

[00:27:07] And dear beloved brethren, there's a great deal that's happened in the last three years. Hasn't it?

A great deal has happened in the last three years. Paul was now in prison. I say again, let's thank God that he was in prison. Because if he hadn't been in prison, you wouldn't have got the letter to the Ephesians, you wouldn't have got the letter to the Philippians, you wouldn't have got the letter to the Colossians, you wouldn't have got the second letter to Timothy, and you wouldn't have got the epistle to Philemon.

But again, in the second epistle, in the face of all that had apparently gone wrong, he says to this young man, be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, [00:28:02] nor of me, his prisoner.

Thank God there is an abundance of Christians in this world today who are not ashamed of the Lord. Thank God for every one of them.

But the question is, can they say the same in regard to Paul's shame?

Paul in this first chapter says to Timothy, be not thou ashamed. He says in the middle of the chapter, I am not ashamed. He points to another man who had sought him out, which may have resulted in his losing his life. He is not ashamed. He was not ashamed of my shame.

Ashamed of maintaining the truth of God as particularly committed to the apostle Paul [00:29:05] and handed on to Timothy.

You remember the story of the shipwreck at the end of Acts, where they threw the anchors overboard and cut the ship adrift? What did Paul say? You should have listened to me.

You should have listened to me.

I trust, beloved brethren, we have got ears that are listening to Paul and have not got ears that are itching, that need something else to satisfy.

Itching ears are an irritation.

[00:30:01] Have we got ears for what Paul ministered? Have we got lives that are prepared to take up and run the course that he ran and to finish it as he finished it?

Hold fast the form of sound words.

The outline, not just part of the truth, but the whole truth of God.

In regard to the Lord's letter to Philadelphia, having referred to it earlier, he said to them, You have kept my word.

You have not denied my name. You have kept the word of my patience. The ministry of John, the ministry of Paul, and the ministry of Peter.

I'll leave you to work that one out.

[00:31:04] The Lord commended Philadelphia, thou hast a little strength, part of the scripture, the New Testament. We need to keep all of it, every bit of it. We mustn't get lopsided. I can illustrate that from what we have read. I do not think Timothy was an evangelist. He may not have had the gift of an evangelist. He was delegated by the apostle to maintain the truth, to minister the truth that Paul committed to him. But Paul said to him, Do the work of an evangelist.

Timothy was not to become lopsided.

His concern for church truth [00:32:03] was to be balanced by a concern for the souls of men.

If ever the truth of that needed illustrating, it can be seen in the life of the apostle Paul himself. The care of the church is which came upon him daily. And yet was there never a man whose heart went out particularly to those of his own nation. His desire was that all Israel might be saved. What a heart he had. What a mind he had. What a servant he was.

And he was passing off the scene. And so he says to Timothy, Hold fast the form of sound words.

That good thing which was committed unto thee. [00:33:01] Now there it is. That good thing that was committed unto thee.

Keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us.

That wasn't just written for Timothy's sake.

It was written, beloved brethren, for you and I as well.

That good thing that was committed to our trust.

Let us keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us. What resources that we have. Thou therefore my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. You can't blame God for the breakdown. You can't blame God for the departure.

[00:34:05] Because there's resource at the right hand of God. Because it's resident in that blessed man, Christ Jesus.

And Paul knew what he was talking about when he said to that young man, Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Because he'd heard that man say to him, My grace is sufficient for thee.

Paul experimentally knew what he was talking about.

Beloved brethren, I hope you and I do. I hope I know a bit about what I'm talking about. Because if I don't, I'm just sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

[00:35:01] And if what I say I don't say in love, it profiteth me nothing.

It might affect something in you, but it will profit me nothing at the judgment seat if one's motive is not the motive that I have learnt from Christ himself and his love.

The things that thou hast heard of me, the same.

Not something different. Not something different. What you heard from me, the same. Commit thou to faithful men.

That's part of the charge.

Don't just keep it to yourself. Teach it. [00:36:01] Commit it to men who can follow on. And as far as they are concerned, make sure that those men are able to teach others also.

And so the truth of God has been handed down. And here we are, beloved brethren, at the end of the line. We are, you know. We're at the end of the line.

The coming of the Lord is not far away. Here we are at the end of the line. Have we kept what we received from men of God who taught us the full counsel of God and left us in a place of tremendous

responsibility? That's why Paul continually looks for the appearing. [00:37:04] The rapture is a blessed moment. Supreme joy.

We see the Lord.

He shall have his bride. But the appearing has to do with responsibility. A different matter altogether. And Paul said we must all appear at the beamer seat of Christ to receive the things done in the body. I charge you, says Paul, in the sight of God. Keep. It's a very serious thing.

Do I stop, Arthur, or can I have another five minutes? The end of his life.

Chapter four.

Preach the word.

[00:38:03] Sound doctrine.

The truth.

The end of chapter three. Holy scriptures. Do you get the message? It's the truth.

It's sound doctrine. It's the scriptures. The holy writings. The word of God. That's what it's all about. The charge.

And he says, for I am now ready to be offered. Jacob's drink offering came at the end when he arrived where God wanted to bring him. El Bethel. The end that God brought him to.

And he pours out a drink offering. If you go through the Old Testament and look up the drink offerings, you'll find they nearly always come at the end of a course. Take the Nazarites vow. [00:39:03] There's another illustration. Take Paul.

Because this word here, ready to be offered, is really a libation. A pouring out.

That is the way that Paul looked upon the end of his course being poured out. He speaks of it to the Philippians. Upon the sacrifice of your service.

Think of it, beloved brethren. The joy of a man of God looking at the end of his life as the pouring out of a libation to God.

Can you not remember the words of one who said, this is my blood which was poured out for you.

Where did Paul learn it? He learned it from Christ. [00:40:02] And if you don't learn these things from Christ, you'll never keep them. The Lord may use instruments and thank God for every one of them. But we will only maintain the truth of God as we maintain it in communion and in relation to Christ.

Paul, in this verse, looks at his present circumstances. I am now ready to be poured out. He looks back over his life.

I have fought the good fight. I have finished my course. He looks onward to the future. There is therefore laid up for me a crown of righteousness. What a blessed thing it is to be able to take stock of things at the end of your life. To be able to say in those circumstances [00:41:02] with death before you, I am ready.

Why? Because I've finished. And therefore, there is laid up for me at the judgment seat. That's a very, very challenging and yet a very wonderful thing. But he says, not to me only, but to all those who love his appearance.

The road that Paul went is open to every one of us.

But we must finish with the Lord Jesus because there is the perfect example. At the end of his life, in anticipation of the cross, he could say, Father, I have finished the work that thou gavest me to do.

[00:42:02] Glorify thou me along with thine own self. He speaks as a man.

But in all the dignity and the glory of his person, with that glory that I had with thee before the world was, if you want the truth of eternal sonship, it's there.

Who was he before the world's were? What was he before the world's were? He hasn't changed one iota in his person. He may have changed his position, but as to his person, he is eternally what he is because divine persons cannot change.

God is absolute.

And absolute means that it is not affected or changed by circumstances or exterior powers. And the Incarnation didn't alter one iota [00:43:01] the person of God's beloved Son. What he was in manhood, he was in eternity, the Son.

But as a man, he asks to be reinvested in that place alongside of thee.

Why? I have glorified thee on earth. I have finished the work that thou gavest me to do. Thank God.

Thank God.

Because of that finished work, you and I will stand eternally in the presence of God, in all the intimacy of divine favour, blessed as he is blessed, as dear as he is dear, [00:44:03] as near as he is near.

Why? Because he said it is finished and finished eternally to the glory of God.

And because of it, you and I will be eternally blessed. In the light of that, beloved brethren, let us look to him and let us hear the words of his servant Paul to Timothy. Keep that which has been entrusted to you.

May it be of the Lord, Terry, that we know what it is to be able to say I have finished my course. I have kept my faith.

Therefore there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness [00:45:03] which the Lord, the righteous

judge, shall give me.

What a moment that will be.

What a moment it will be when we see him. What a moment it might be that I receive from that peace of mind a crown of righteousness because I have been faithful to him down here and I have kept in my own little way and done what the Lord gave me to do.

May it be so, beloved brethren, with every one of us in this room, to the Lord's praise and God's eternal glory. Amen.