

RELIGION

Scripture of the Week

Colossians 3:15-17

What It Means To 'Keep The Faith'

BY MICHAEL LINDSEY

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The text for the Sunday School lesson (International Series) for next Sunday is Acts 28:21-31. This is the last in our three-month survey of the ministry of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts. In December we begin a series on the "Songs and Prayers of the Bible."

Life is often likened to a race. The course may be long, there may be obstacles, but there is always a direction, and a goal, and a finish line. And if you see life as a race, you will also have an innate sense of urgency in your living, a sense that what you're doing really counts in the eternal scales of life. Paul admonished the Corinthian believers: "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain" (1 Cor 9:24).

What would he obtain? The Greek Olympian ran in the hope of receiving the fleeting honor of being crowned with a laurel wreath. But the Christian runs the race of his life in hopes of an "incorruptible crown" (9:25), that is, honor from the Lord in glory which will last forever.

But there is a difference between athletic races and the course of human life, a difference which makes that incorruptible crown all the more attractive and important. In the race of life, people are running after a lot of different goals at the same time. Their paths cross yours at very sharp angles, and bumping is allowed.

Have you ever looked at their goals? Some of them look so self-defeating, like drug overdoses, or chronic unemployment, or personal despair. Some of their goals look really appealing, such as wealth, popularity, or self-indulgent pleasure. Now we who are Christians have been told that such goals turn out to be mirages, always retreating from those who run after them, never bringing the satisfaction promised. But it's hard to remember that when so many others are running their race in that direction, and seem to be getting some of the promised perks along the way.

We need to keep our eyes on the prize--"the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14)--and recognize that the rewards we shall obtain from His hand far exceed anything this world can offer. That doesn't mean the Christian life is free of trials, heartaches, defeats and mistakes. It is a struggle to climb for the mountain top. But have you ever experienced the exhilaration of enduring the hardship of a long climb, and finally reaching the beautiful vistas at the top? With the exertion comes the reward. No pain, no gain.

Having a clear focus, a definite purpose for your life, can make sense out of all the details, good and bad, which come your way. The Christian hope is so much more than just "pie in the sky, bye and bye." It gives direction and purpose to all the decisions of life, and it should lift a Christian above the mere "reactive" mode of life, which so many others experience.

It sure did for the Apostle Paul. He looked forward eagerly to his eternal rewards, and the blessedness of being with his Savior for all eternity. But he knew he had a particular purpose in life, set by his Lord, which he could clearly state when he was tried (see last week's lesson, Acts 26:17-18). He set clear objectives, such as ministering the gospel in Rome and Spain (Acts 19:21; Rom 15:28-29). And those objectives kept him on course when the obstacles (very predictable) loomed up in his path.

Paul was discouraged by other Christian leaders, then arrested in Jerusalem, nearly killed by a mob there, held illegally for over two years in Jerusalem and Caesarea, sent to Rome on a ship which was wrecked at Malta. From what he told the Roman Christians, we're sure he wasn't planning on going to Rome as a prisoner.

But what did it matter? He made it to Rome, and had the freedom to receive guests there. So he seized the opportunities to advance his purpose--indeed, God's purpose for him--by inviting the leaders of the Jewish com-

munity in Rome to come to his own house (Acts 28:17,23) and there he ably presented the truth about Jesus Christ to them. As so often in other cities, a few believed, but most hardened their hearts against his teachings. This did not thwart the Lord's purpose, because the Apostle could still eagerly share his faith with others around him.

During this time Paul wrote the "Prison Epistles," Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. From these wonderful expositions of faith, we know Paul was busy training and equipped others to spread the gospel message. Paul himself, through the Roman guards, was evangelizing the very household of Nero Caesar himself (Phil 1:13). Instead of becoming discouraged by strife and jealousy among the saints in Rome, he concentrated on the good things accomplished by both sides in the argument (1:14-18). Paul's focus on his purpose gave him added strength to cope with distractions.

We might wonder why Luke left off his account of Paul's journeys here in Rome. We know Paul had been in Rome two years when Luke wrote (Acts 28:30), and it may well be that Luke had accomplished his literary purpose in bringing Paul to the capital of the Empire. We can confidently state that Paul was released this time, and continued to preach the gospel and visit some of the churches he'd started earlier. During this period he wrote 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, for the personal itinerary of 1 Timothy and Titus does not match the travels recorded in Acts.

In 2 Timothy we read the final testimony of the great Apostle, perhaps again in chains in Rome: "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:6-7). There are no regrets here. Paul lived a hard life, but it was good, godly life, given in service to others, and to his Lord. This Christian life we can commend to anyone; why settle for less than a "crown" from the Lord?

City-Wide Gospel Music Workshop

Choral directors, musicians and composers have gotten together, from all over the Christian community, to hold a most unique CITY-WIDE gospel workshop at Mount Olivet Baptist Church, 116 NE Schuyler. Registration will begin at 6:30 nightly at a one-time cost of \$3.00.

Class sessions will begin November 18th and will continue through and include November 22nd. Subjects to be taught:

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Douglass Miller has received numerous awards for his rendition of "My Soul Is Anchored." This concert will be held at the Maranatha Church located at 4222 NE 12th on November 27, 1991 at 7:00 p.m.

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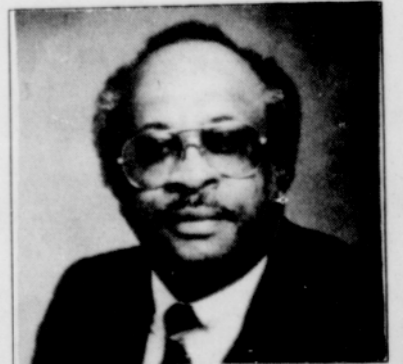
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Theme: Whatever you're going to do for the Lord, do it now

1 Peter 4:11

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