

Bet Your Life on It?

2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Do you bet your life on it? Is one of the favourite questions I ask my confirmation students when they give an answer to whatever the catechism asks. In part I ask the question to aid them in learning, but mostly it is a serious question, do you bet your life on it!?

So, this morning as you confessed your faith in the Nicene Creed, did you confessed the words betting your life on them? Now, before you answer, think again what you are going to say, because as it happens, betting your life on it, is a serious matter, and confessing our faith, declaring it publicly it is a matter of betting our life on that confession. So, do you bet your life on it?

That's exactly what is happening in the reading of 2 Timothy 4. From a prison cell in Rome, Paul writes his second letter to Timothy. He knew that his life was coming to an end. Although he says that himself was "already being poured out as a drink offering." Maybe because of all he had gone through in his ministry, or because they were torturing him in his prison cell, we don't know exactly what he was referring too, just that he has been poured out as a drink offering, but that his end was approaching. And the end did come. The most accepted tradition as to how Paul died, comes from the writings of Eusebius, an early church historian. He claimed that Paul was beheaded at the order of the Roman emperor Nero or one of his subordinates. It happened shortly after much of Rome burned in a fire—an event that Nero blamed on the Christians.

Tradition or not, we know that Paul died because of his faith. He did really bet his life on what he believed and confessed, in his ministry and now close to being killed.

But in all, he said “I have kept the faith.” And he was so sure that the “Crown of righteousness” was awaiting him. But how was he able to keep the faith, how was he able to be sure? How can you, yourself be so sure? Why would you bet your life on the confession of your faith? Those are the questions I would like to reflect on today.

In our reading, we see that despite all the uncertainty about his situation and all the uncertainty that would seem to come along with death itself, Paul is full of certainty as he writes to Timothy. With absolute certainty, he says, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom” (v 18). He has no doubts about that. And that’s not all. He is so sure that Jesus, the righteous judge, will award him the crown of righteousness in the resurrection on the Last Day. But how can he be so sure? How can you be so sure?

In this uncertain world, how can we be so sure? How can we be so sure of the certainty of our faith? Or at least make sense of things for that certainty to take place? And as we face the prospect of our own death someday, we need to be certain. So, this morning lets consider, lets find out how Paul become so sure, what made him to be so sure. To be so sure that Jesus would deliver him from every evil and award him the crown of righteousness on the Last Day.

This morning I propose five possibilities for his assurance. And the reason for betting his life on it.

The first possibility for Paul’s certainty could have been based on his conversion experience. Let me explain.

If we're going to find the source of his certainty, maybe we need to start at the beginning, his conversion (Acts 9:1–19). If you know his history, you will remember that his conversion was rather remarkable and undoubtedly left in him an indelible mark, mark that determined his life and ministry. Could that have given him such an assurance? Many Christians seek to find certainty this way don't they. They focus on conversion experiences and the transformation of their lives which has taken place after having been brought to faith. Perhaps an Aha! Moment. Or as other denominations say, when you give your life to Jesus.

But the reality is that while Paul's conversion was remarkable, it could not provide absolute certainty. This is because there are negative experiences that will unbalance the positive ones, they rob the positive of its life and weight. And Paul had his fair share of negative experiences, that could have done the same, could have easily robbed him of this certainty. Have you seen how people come to faith, perhaps because of something bad impacting their lives, but overtime when the bad impact is not there anymore, faith begins to wear off, and certainty becomes frail.

This is what he says of one of those terrible negative experiences: "For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself." (2 Cor 1:8–10) If you read the book of Acts you will hear of his suffering and the afflictions he says he and his companions experienced, that could have made him to stop believing and being certain of his faith.

Now, although Paul's life had indeed been radically transformed, and that kept him going on, that transformation was neither complete nor perfect, because he himself affirms his sinful condition and his struggles

with sin. So, no, I don't think that his spiritual experience in his conversion was really the reason and the cause for his conviction.

Was it then on his apostolic success? Remember that after his conversion, Paul was commissioned by Jesus to be the apostle to the Gentiles. He travelled far and wide, proclaiming the Gospel of Christ, and he was incredibly successful as he did so. Maybe this is what made him so sure. But what about his failures?

While Paul had been successful, all over there were unsuccessful too. Consider Acts 17:22–33, where Paul preaches at the Areopagus in Athens. While so many listened to him and wanted to hear some more later, only a very few people believed there and then. Paul clearly wasn't completely successful in everything he did. And for him to base his certainty on his success, he had to be successful all the time, but how could he ever know if he had been successful enough?

Many people, Christians and non-Christians try to find certainty in life this way. People look at their accomplishments in life, the good works they have done, or the leaders they admire and follow, be it religious or political leaders. They try to reassure themselves this way. But we know that numbers and popularity are not somethings we can trust. They often fail us, not worth betting our lives on them.

So, what was it that gave him certainty? Was it perhaps the Lord's past care and provisions his life? Possibly! You know, how God took care of him and provided what he needed could be a strong reason for his being sure. Looking back at his life and some of the difficult times he had experienced, Paul could see how the Lord Jesus had stood by him time and again and safely delivered him, inspiring in him certainty.

That's what many have experienced too, they find reassurance especially in difficult times. They remember times in the past when God had stood by them and faithfully cared for and provided for them. I know I do that quite often, and it does help to get back on track when doubts and failures overcome us.

But could memories like these really make Paul sure that he would receive the crown of righteousness on the Last Day? If there is somebody who could boast in those memories will be him, but Paul's certainty here seems to stretch well beyond assurances about God's providential care. There is something else that moves Paul not only to keep going in his life but betting that life on his assurance.

Well then, could it be that Paul's certainty was based on his faith? After all, in our reading today, Paul says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness" (vs. 7–8). It sure sounds as if Paul's own faith is the source of his certainty, but what exactly does Paul mean here?

Many try to find certainty by trusting in their own faith. These people often say things like "Don't worry, my faith is strong!" Or tell other something like: "you need to believe more!" What they refer too, is their human ability to believe. But the human ability to believe is based on one's own strength, but that can only go so far. The problem with this kind of certainty, however, is that it is never complete. What if we doubt?

How do we know if we have believed enough? That's why I don't think Paul's own faith—his own ability to believe and keep the faith—was the source of certainty. He was a man of faith indeed. But of a different kind of faith,

If so, then what was it that gave Paul certainty? Paul's certainty was based on Christ crucified. To understand how Paul could be so sure and to understand the role of his faith in this certainty, we go back to something at the beginning of his Second Letter to Timothy: "I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me" (1:12).

The source of Paul's certainty wasn't his own faith, but it was the one in whom he believed. Jesus, the one in whom Paul believed, the object of Paul's faith, was his source of certainty. Or, as Paul put it in Galatians, "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14).

Paul's certainty, his assurance, wasn't in anything inside himself. It was in Christ and in Christ alone. Because he knew and believed Christ had been crucified for him and for the world, Paul was sure that Jesus would deliver him from evil and award him that crown of righteousness. In fact, Christ crucified gave meaning and importance to all the other possibilities we had considered before this point.

Paul's conversion experience had meaning and could provide certainty not so much in itself but because Paul had been baptized into Christ crucified. Paul's apostolic work mattered because it had been done in the name of Christ crucified, and nothing done in the Lord, whether a success or a failure by worldly standards, is done in vain. Paul had the certainty that in Christ crucified all his sins and failures were forgiven.

Paul's memories of how the Lord had stood by him in times of suffering mattered because they were further expressions of the gracious care God gives now that he is reconciled to us by Christ's death on the cross (Rom 8:32).

Paul's faith mattered because it was faith which clung to Christ and the free gift of righteousness which flows from his cross.

So how could Paul be so sure? Because he knew Jesus Christ and him crucified. And that's Good News for you and me, too, because Jesus Christ was not only crucified for Paul. He was crucified also for the world. He was crucified for every human being who has ever lived. He was crucified for you. And that means that Jesus Christ and Him Crucified Is Your Certainty in Life and in Death!

In life and in death, we all face uncertainty, just like Paul. But in life and in death, this one fact remains sure: Jesus Christ was crucified for your sins, was raised for your justification, and in him, you have eternal life. Do your bet your life on it? We do, because we too can be sure that he will deliver us from every evil deed, bring you safely into his heavenly kingdom, and award you the crown of life in the resurrection on the Last Day. You can be sure of it.

In Jesus' name! Amen.