Responsibility and Reward

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Preacher: Jonathan Lamb

[0:00] Well, hello again, and thank you very much for coming back. I admire your stamina, and we're going to look at those verses which Al has just read from us, and you'll see the title I've given it is Responsibility and Reward.

There are two key themes that run through this little section, and I think very important ones. Every so often I have to drive into London.
We live in Oxford, and it's about an hour and a half driving on the M40 to go into London. And if you know that part of the motorway system, you go down the M40, and then you hit the M25, the circular around London.
And as you drive and you get closer to this M25 circular road, the traffic begins to slow down. It gets very heavy, and more and more vehicles. I mean, it's rather like coming into Edinburgh at 8 in the morning.
Everything everyone's, or at least they used to, come into offices. I don't know if they're back in offices yet. But you know how it is in big cities. Everything slows down. And this was happening to me. And eventually the traffic was so heavy that we stopped dead, and we were sitting there for a while.
[1:11] And I looked over to the left, and there was a huge field with a fence all the way around the field. And a graffiti artist had written a message on the fence to all of us commuting into London.

And the message was just six or seven words. Why do I do this every day? Sort of words of exhortation to all of us trying to get into London.
And I've often thought of that as a really significant question that we should ask. Maybe I can ask it of you. Why do you do what you do?
What motivates you? What are the big reasons for living as you live? Why do I do what I do? I recently went to a book launch in Oxford.
Here's the book. It's called 4,000 Weeks. And the title actually comes from the typical length of your lifespan. I've already had 3,800, I think.
[2:11] And you've got 4,000. I think that's up to 77. And the reason why he chose that was to write about time and how to use it.

And he's particularly in the book. It's a really interesting book about the way in which you can redeem time, the way you can not be over-anxious about your small span of time left.
Some people do become very worried. I've got to get this done. How to live relatively peacefully with your 4,000 weeks. But in the question time which followed, someone asked a very good question.
He said, well, how does your mortality affect the way you live? And he didn't answer it. He was only into these sort of time management issues. I shouldn't devalue all the things he said, which is a very interesting book, a valuable book.
But it was a good question. How does your mortality, the thought of your... You may have more than 4,000. Some of you here have more than 4,000 weeks. I guess you are. Is that your hand, Christine?
[3:16] Well, fewer or more. Well, that's a question that does thinking about your mortality impact you. In fact, I had a question which I wasn't able to put.

And that was, what if the Christian faith is true? What if there is a longer horizon to think about? Not simply your 4,000 weeks, but a life beyond this.
How does that shape the way you live? Well, that's what we're going to look at just for these next few minutes. Why do I do this every day? What are my motivations?

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What really matters for us as individuals and indeed as a Christian community? And here in Matthew 25, Jesus is again demonstrating that issue. How the future impacts the way we live now. So if we have Jesus return in our hearts and minds, it will radically impact the way we live. It just affects our motivations, our decisions, our manner of life.
[4:13] In fact, there are several Bible verses, not just these ones, which encourage us to live life looking forwards. There's loads of them. I just chose two. Here's Hebrews 13.

For here we have no enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Or Peter, from the passage we've been looking at earlier. But in keeping with his promises, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells.
So living life looking forward is a lovely perspective, isn't it? And we find it frequently in the epistles as well as in the gospels.
It's clear that if we do that, if we live our lives looking forward in the light of Jesus' return, there are many Bible passages. We'll look at one tomorrow in 1 Thessalonians, which then encourage us to live as we should.
Live as good disciples. Live like Jesus. It helps us cope with suffering. It helps us think about our use of money. All kinds of things are tied up with this kind of perspective. So here in Matthew 25, there are two stories.
[5:15] We're going to look at them very briefly and draw out the conclusions. There's a master and servants and then the sheep and the goats. So here's the first one, the master and servants.

It's from verse 14 to verse 30. And the parable begins in verse 14 with a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them.
Some translations say this is the parable of the talents. A talent is a unit of measurement. It's not a currency, but depending what you're weighing, a talent could be worth quite a lot.
In fact, the NIV note, I think, on this passage says that one talent was equivalent to 20 years of a day laborer's work. So it's pretty substantial. A lot of money.
My NIV here calls them bags of gold. Well, you'll notice how the story goes. Each servant is given responsibility. And he gives five bags of gold to one servant, two bags of gold to the next, and one bag of gold to the other, each according to their ability.
[6:20] He assesses what they can manage. Every servant is given something to do. And then he goes and he leaves them to deploy this money sensibly, responsibly, to invest it in one way or another.

And the story goes on to show the man with five pots of gold puts that money to work. And the end result was another five. And he doubled his money.
And the same happened with the man with two bags, who also doubled it. Another two more. And then we come to verse 18. And the word there is very significant.
But, you'll notice verse 18. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master's money. It's quite a forceful emphasis.
But he dug a hole and hid the money. Well, then verse 19, the next stage of the story, the master returns. And you'll notice Matthew record Jesus saying, after a long time.
[7:22] It's possible that's a little bit of an echo to what we were looking at before coffee. This long wait. You know, the ten girls waiting for the bridegroom. And Noah, as it was in the days of Noah, can be a long delay, a long wait.

Well, here it is again. Eventually, after a long time, the master returns. And the key thing is that these servants should not be passive while waiting.
They should have got on with the job. So, the man with five bags, who's managed to double it, the master comes to him. And he's overjoyed.
In fact, it says in verse 21, The faithful steward, servant, was rewarded.
The same happened for the man with two bags. He'd made two, and you'll get the same commendation by the master. But then by verse 24, we come to the man with just one bag.
[8:26] And he's described as the wicked, the lazy servant. He said to the master, I know that you're a hard man. It's a word for harsh, cruel, stern. I was afraid, he said.

So, I hid it in the ground. And here's your money, safe and sound. And of course, we know how the master responded. You wicked, lazy servant. You could at least have put it on deposit.
I mean, if he just put it in the bank, he would have made something, some small interest, some return on that investment. He didn't even do that. And so, the lazy servant is condemned.

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You see from verse 24 onwards, you wicked, you should have put my money on deposit. Throw that worthless servant outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.
Now, it's a very dramatic parable, isn't it? The lesson is clear. So, I want to just draw out two things which have been on my mind, actually, for some while.
[9:25] Responsibility and reward. The issue of rewards is in the New Testament, and it's rarely spoken about. At least it never was when I was young. It was only recently in the last few years I've begun to see how important this theme is.

So, should we look at those two things, responsibility and reward, from this little story? Let's take, first of all, responsibility. We saw earlier the importance of being ready, being active, being prepared, watching for Jesus' return.
And this next parable that we had just read and looked at is saying the same thing. Don't be passive. You're responsible to live your life in the light of what your gifts might be, whatever it is, the responsibility you have.
You've got to do that faithfully and fruitfully. So, it may be that you're a mum. Maybe you're an IT worker downtown. It may be you're retired and you have some time to do various things.
It may be that you're a student. Whoever you are, invest in that service that God has given you so that it honors the Lord Jesus. So, it's fruitful. It will produce a good outcome.
[10:31] Last week, Margaret and I went into the Ashmolean Museum. If you're ever in Oxford, you should really visit. It's a lovely, lovely museum. And they have an exhibition at the moment about the father of Impressionism.

His name is Pissarro. And here he is. This is a self-portrait. I don't know if you can quite see him on screen. It was just a quick shot on my mobile phone. He's a French painter. And this self-portrait he did in 1903.
And by that stage, he was about 73 years old. Nearly 4,000 weeks, I should mention. And he was feeling very physically infirm.
He was very frail. So, he wrote to his children just after his 73rd birthday. I think I've got it. Yes, let me put it on screen. I shall do my best, my utmost, to follow my destiny by working as hard as possible, because the thread that is keeping me here on earth is very near to unraveling completely.
And what I liked about it, he said that in 1903, he painted his self-portrait in 1903. He died in 1903. So, he was understanding himself correctly.
[11:43] Was it right to the end? He wanted to keep working. He wanted to fulfill his destiny, as he put it. I don't know if there's any Christian conviction behind that sentiment. But at least he wanted to be a good steward of the gifts he evidently had.

He produced some wonderful, wonderful paintings in early and late Impressionism. Now, there's an even better example, which I'll put up on screen. It's from Paul.
He said something very similar. And I think it's a really impressive statement. He was about to leave the Ephesian elders. So, when you read that testimony in Acts 20, you say, well, here is a man who has his priorities clear.
You know, this is how he viewed his life. It wasn't a possession that he wanted to hold on to at all costs. He wasn't worried about his own security, his own well-being. It wasn't a big concern about his own comfort.
When you read, especially to Corinthians, you see what the man went through. He had a very clear purpose, this overriding concern to be faithful to the Lord Jesus who called him and to finish the task that he'd been given.
[13:00] And do you think that's an echo of what Jesus is saying in his parable about the talents, the bags of gold? And Paul was living with the end in view. He was going to see the master.

And at the end of 2 Timothy, he describes that. He's looking forward to that day. But until then, he's working energetically, wholeheartedly with the job that God had given him to do.
But he says to Timothy, to whom he's writing in his last letter in 2 Timothy, in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and kingdom, I give you this charge, Timothy, young Timothy, preach the word.
And he told him, get on with the job. So it's the same idea. In the light of Jesus' coming, the Lord who will judge the living and the dead. So whatever our responsibility, some of us it might be

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considerable.
For most of us, perhaps relatively modest, but we have jobs to do that we believe the Lord's called us to do, whatever it might be. And our job is to fulfill that faithfully, wholeheartedly, productively.
[14:09] And that should be uppermost in our minds, that the Lord is coming. I want to make sure I use what I have for his benefit. Do you know the story of Lord Shaftesbury?

He was a remarkable parliamentarian, but most of all, a fantastic social reformer, philanthropist. He did an awful lot to help in the textile mills, in the factories and the mines.
He tried to improve working conditions for people, especially concerned about children. He tackled child labor. He championed the education for poor children. He did work to try and stop children going up chimneys, his chimney sweeps.
He was an extraordinary man. He made prison reform, helping people in lunatic asylums. He was packed out his life with all of the things he wanted to do and introduce into legislation in this country.
But what's really interesting about this man is not only a very impressive biography, but this is what he said. I do not think that in the last 40 years, I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of the Lord's return.
[15:20] Interesting, isn't it? That he was somebody so committed to that future, to a new heaven, a new earth, a new universe, that far from wanting to escape from his body or escape from this rather sordid London where he was working, No, it threw him into greater service, more responsible actions.

Well, of course, we are very different from Wilberforce. Most of us, although God needs to raise up more like him, I think. But we should also have that same attitude of mind.
Are we going to put our bags of gold to work or are we just going to bury it and wait? No, we want to serve the returning king. It is something of a paradox, actually, when you think about it.
I'll put up something that C.S. Lewis once said, that if you have that view of the future and of Jesus' return, it makes a huge difference to life now.
Here's what C.S. Lewis said. If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next.
[16:25] And actually, in Mere Christianity, he goes on. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think about the other world, the future, that they've become ineffective in this.

So that's, I think, the key issue from this little parable, acting responsibly in the light of what God has called us to do. But then the second thing is to think for a moment about reward.
We've seen in the parable how the Lord honored and rewarded the faithful servants, the guys who had five gold bags and two gold bags.
They were using them responsibly, so they were given the reward of doing even more. It picks up a theme which, as I said a moment ago, is not so common, but I think it's worth reminding ourselves of.
Here on the screen is a passage from 2 Corinthians 5, where Paul had been writing to encourage us to get on with the job of mission, to be ambassadors. It's a lovely chapter, 2 Corinthians 5, about our Christian motivation.
[17:30] And in the middle of it, he reminds us, not only are we compelled by Christ's love, and not only are we sent out by Christ the King as ambassadors, but we also are responsible to Christ the judge.

Verse 10 of 2 Corinthians 5, we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive what is due for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.
Now what Paul is doing here is describing a future reality. This is a judgment for everyone, it seems to be, and it's not a judgment about our destiny, our eternal destiny.
It's a judgment on our stewardship, how we've lived, how we've used the resources God has given us. And as I've thought about this passage and others, I don't think it's intended in any way to cloud our hope for the future, or to dampen our joy at the prospect of being with Jesus, because the Jesus we're going to meet is the Jesus who gave his life for us, and the Jesus who has redeemed us and forgiven us, and who's going to welcome us into our home.
So we don't read these passages with a sense of fear, but I think we do read them with a certain sense of responsibility. So Paul says, I'm a builder. In fact, let me move to the second passage, which is in 1 Corinthians 3.

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[18:53] And he says, I'm a builder, I've laid the foundation. The foundation is the Lord Jesus. He says, by the grace of God, I've laid this foundation. So his own work, as all of our work, is to do with God's grace.

And then he says, now you have to build on this foundation. So if your life is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, you're absolutely secure, now and into eternity.
There is no doubt at all. Whoever you are, what you've done, it's all forgiven through Jesus, if you've put your trust in him. You're on that foundation. But, he says, take care how you build.
You can either build with wood and hay and stubble, he says in these verses in 1 Corinthians 3, or you can build with things that will last, with gold and silver and precious stones.
And he goes on to say, because our building work will be tested. We'll find out if you've been building with things of lasting value. Now one day, that building that we've been putting together will be tested, as I say, and on that judgment day, will it last?
[20:02] Or will it just disappear in the cloud of smoke? So, as I've put on the screen there, it's an encouragement to be a good builder. Build for something that will last forever.

How you build matters. How you live your life counts. And Jesus spoke a bit about this, didn't he? He spoke about putting your treasure in heaven.
You know, building for something that, not just the earthly material possessions, but treasure for the future. Well, Paul is urging us to be good stewards of our lives.
And as we think about the rewards to the servants in the parable, we can also know that Jesus will give us responsibilities too. We don't know much about it.
But it seems that responsible service now will lead to responsible, even greater responsible service in the future. I think it's a bit like, you know, the physical and the spiritual. I think it was Michael Green who said these things are rather similar.
[21:01] So, some of you, you know, work out all the time. You've got fantastic muscles. And the reward for that is you can carry even heavier bags quite easily. But if you don't exercise, I say this as somebody who's guilty, if you don't exercise very much, then begin to lose the capacity, don't you?

Your muscles begin to atrophy. Even the relatively few muscles I've got will begin to fade away. So, if you're exercising spiritually, doing all the things that God calls you to do in your life, you're building the muscle so that in the future you can have even more responsibility, more rewards.
That, I think, is part of what this little parable is about. Well, we come to the final one. We've looked at master and servant, now sheep and goats.
By the way, I've said several things there which you might want to pick up in our question time. Because the issues of surrounding rewards is not altogether straightforward. Let's revisit that if you'd like to.
What about the sheep and the goats? And Jesus, in this parable, as he closes this chapter, is even more direct in his addressing the theme of judgment.
[22:16] And the picture changes again. And you'll notice, verse 31, right at the beginning, there are these opening statements about the king. Let me put it on screen. When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

All the nations will be gathered before him. So, as he begins this final illustration, the first thing to notice about judgment is it is universal.
Do you see that? There echoes from the Old Testament, actually, from prophets like Daniel who said this. But all nations are there. He's sitting on his throne. They're all gathered before him.
So, every person, they respect their nationality, their ethnicity, their age, male, female, rich, poor. Everyone is there. And then, second, you'll notice it is Jesus now who is acting as the judge.
The Son of Man who's going to carry out the judgment. In the Old Testament, it was God who was calling the nations before him to be accountable. Here, Jesus picks it up. It's Jesus who is the judge.
[23:23] And we know that from other passages in the New Testament. God has given Jesus that responsibility. And carefully, this Son of Man separates out people.

He uses the illustration of a Palestinian shepherd. And it's quite common. If you've been in that part of the world, you'll see they're very mixed flocks. And you can't always tell the difference, actually, between the sheep and goats in the Middle East.

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Some of the sheep actually look dark and scraggy. They're not like the beautiful, fluffy, white sheep you have on your Edinburgh hills. They're often quite similar to goats.
So, they're separated out. And then, verse 34, to one group, to the sheep on the right, Jesus says, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.
He separates them out between sheep and goats. And in this story, what is the basis of the judgment that Jesus is going to make here between sheep and goats? And it's repeated, actually, several times in the account.
[24:32] Verse 34, I'll put it up on screen. But as I say, it's repeated in different ways. It's a sequence of things. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat.

I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me in. I needed clothes, and you clothed me. I was ill, and you looked after me. I was in prison, and you came to visit me.
And the other group, the goats, are condemned because they did nothing. In the face of overwhelming need, in the face of Jesus himself, I'll just explain that in a moment, they don't lift a finger.
Well, how do we understand this passage? And I tell you, a lot has been written about it, and I just offer how I see it. For the past century and a half, at least, most people commenting on this passage have said it refers to helping the poor, helping the estranged, the imprisoned, the isolated, the vulnerable.
And, of course, we know that is vital that we do. And people have argued, well, what you're doing is you're basically serving Jesus by serving the poor and the communities who are listed here.
[25:50] In fact, as I say, prophets like Isaiah and Amos, indeed, Paul himself in Galatians, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

So we know Jesus taught this concern for the well-being of the poor. But when you look carefully at the basis of judgment in this story, you'll notice it appears twice.
Sorry, have I got it there or not? Yes, there it is, sorry. Truly, I tell you, whatever you did to one of these, the least of the brothers, you are doing to me.
As you look at what Matthew says elsewhere, it seems that when he calls people his brothers and sisters, or the least of these my brothers and sisters, he's referring to his disciples.
He's talking about the believing community. So from verses 48 to 50, in chapter 12 of Matthew, he talks about people wanting Jesus to come out to meet his mother and his brothers.
[27:03] So if you remember that story. And Jesus replies, well, here are my brothers and sisters. And he's talking about his disciples. Those who do the will of my Father in heaven are my brothers and sisters.

So I explain this because one way of understanding, and I think probably the better way of understanding this passage, is that it's talking about people's response to Jesus' disciples.
Or if you like, more fully, judgment is based on our attitude to Jesus, and to Jesus' messengers, and to the gospel. How you respond to Jesus, the messengers of Jesus, the disciples, and indeed to the gospel itself, is the key in terms of judgment.
We can, again, pick this up if it would be helpful in our discussion. But as the king has all the nations before him, how they've responded to Jesus is seen in how they responded to his messengers, and to the gospel, and perhaps also for us.
How have they treated Jesus' faithful servants? I think we can ask that question, you know, the way in which we also care for God's people. In Brunsfield, or in the global church, one of the things that concerns many of us, of course, is the way in which many, many Christian believers around the world are under pressure of persecution.
[28:34] Open Doors, in their latest World Watch, reckons 360 million Christians living in contexts with high levels of persecution or discrimination.

That's one in seven Christians worldwide under immense pressure, because they name the name of Jesus. And the way we pray for them and support them and lobby governments and do all we can to help Jesus' brothers and sisters in that context is one application, perhaps, of these verses.
But I think we've got to see that Jesus, on that day, will be judging people according to the response they make to the gospel, to the gospel messengers, to Jesus himself, therefore.

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And also it reminds us that the way we treat other disciples, brothers and sisters, is a reflection of how we treat Jesus. After all, we are one body, the body of Christ.
And Jesus gave the new commandment to love one another. Jesus said people will know we're his followers by the way we love. And there is that close identification. Do you remember when Saul was persecuting the Christians?
[29:44] The risen Jesus said, why are you persecuting me? So there is this close association between how people treat Jesus and how people treat those who follow Jesus.

And perhaps that's what's going on in this parable. How you respond to Jesus. Let me say a final thing about this issue of judgment, because it's a sober theme, isn't it?
It's partly why these passages are so demanding and why perhaps we don't look at them as much as we should. Why does judgment matter? And I think there are at least a couple of reasons.
First of all, it's very important to know that justice will be done. There will be justice. And I don't know if you would agree with me, but I think most people want that to happen.
They want to see justice. So you listen to many people in the media. Why do people get away with it? Why are we letting people off the hook?
[30:46] And in wars, you know, Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic, now people are gathering information on Vladimir Putin, because we want to see the international courts call people to account for what they're doing.

So Christian and non-Christian alike, we want to see justice in our world. We want to see justice restored. And I think that's partly why when you go into the Old Testament and you listen to some of the Psalms, like Psalm 96, it talks about a joyful response to judgment.
You know, even the trees are waving at the coming judge. Now, why does it talk about that being a joyful thing? He is coming to judge the earth.
And I think the reason is because he is coming to put things back together as they should be. That's what Jesus is going to do, restore all things.
I'll say more about that perhaps tomorrow. Having said that, we shouldn't read these passages lightly. We should read them with a certain sobriety, I think, because they imply judgment on people around us.
[31:55] And therefore, we don't read them joyfully, but with tears in our eyes. The other thing which I wanted to mention, sorry, is that judgment demonstrates that our actions are significant.

You know, we're not just acting randomly in this world. And how we act, how we live, it does matter. And that, again, is something that we want to remember, that we're accountable in all kinds of ways, for the way in which we use the resources which God has given us.
Well, as I say, we can't miss the sober element of what Jesus is saying, but I thought it would be good to finish by reminding ourselves also of what these parables, and particularly this last one, underline.
And that is our future hope. Do you notice that for the servant who does use his gifts faithfully, the master says, well done, good and faithful servant.
Come and share your master's happiness. That's there in verse 23. And if you go further down, verse 34, then the king says, to those who are on his right, come, you who are blessed by my father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.
[33:08] So it's a fantastic invitation, isn't it, to us who are believing in the Lord Jesus. Let's be ready for that joyful day. Come, the Lord says, you who are blessed by my father.

You've got an inheritance that God has promised and prepared for you. That's the big motivation for living now. It's the invitation of grace and mercy that will eventually lead into heaven and into eternity.
Well, I wonder if you look at these things with a sense of joy. Let me give you one final illustration which I found really helpful. It's in the book by Jim Packer. When he says that thinking about our death and thinking about the future should be something which is inspiring not just hope but a sense of anticipation and joy, he said, rather like children going on holiday.
And I resonated it because when I was a young lad, I was brought up in London, and every summer for one week my parents took us to a little town on the south coast.
You might know it. It's called Charmouth. It's on the Jurassic Coast in Dorset. And we loved it. And we spent the whole week looking for fossils along that stretch of the Jurassic Coast.

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[34:20] And I was so excited about the idea of a week's holiday in August. And I had my little backpack and my geological hammer ready in Easter. You know, months before we were to go, I was looking forward to it.

And that's what Packer says. Each day should find us like children looking forward to their holidays who get packed up and ready to go a long time in advance. That's how we should look at this future.
That's how we should look at meeting the Lord Jesus and entering this inheritance which God has prepared and welcomes us into. So we don't dodge death, not fearful of death.
We don't dodge our heavenly rejoicing. We anticipate it. We look forward to it. I don't think that's morose. I think that's living in the light of eternity.
It's now living in time for eternity. Well, we've seen in this passage that the Lord calls us to be faithful servants who are wholeheartedly working in the light of that return.
[35:29] And I said a moment ago about Paul in 2 Timothy. Do you remember? Virtually the last words that Paul wrote in 2 Timothy. And right at the very end, it's interesting when you read 2 Timothy 4, what he thinks about right at the very end of his life are all his mates.

Actually, it's a long list of friends he lists. But this is what he finally says. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.
Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.
And isn't that something we could emulate? Isn't that a fantastic statement? I'd like to say that.
Would you like to hold that in your hearts, looking to that future? To fight the good fight, to finish the race, to keep the faith, and to be ready to receive the crown of righteousness.
Amen. Thank you again for listening patiently. We're going to pray. I think, actually, what I'll do is hand over to Al, and you can lead us in how we pray for the closing minutes that we have.
[36:38] Thank you very much. Thank you.

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