

Faithful or Faithless?

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you very much, Eric. Good evening, everyone. And again, thank you for coming out. I know there are lots of other things you could have been doing this evening. Really good to see you. I want to start with two men named Jonathan Edwards. Both have the same name. One Jonathan Edwards is famous for jumping into a sandpit. That's his words, not mine. He was very good at it. He set the world triple jump record 30 years ago next month and is still there. I'm actually not sure anyone's ever got close to it.

But Jonathan Edwards was a fantastic athlete. He was also known during his athletic career as a Christian. Indeed, at the start of his career, he was known particularly because out of conscience, he didn't compete on Sundays and he missed a world championship and other things because of that.

And even though he changed his mind on that later, he continued to be known as a Christian. And after he retired from athletics, among other things, he presented songs of praise. And then out of the blue to most people, Jonathan Edwards declared he no longer believed in God. And the way I heard him put it was I'm a scientist. I examined the evidence. I can't be sure there's a God. And so I'm moving on with my life. I'm sure it wasn't really that simple.

But he was someone who started out. But he was someone who started out well as a Christian, who had a really good testimony, and then who ultimately proved to be faithless and not to continue following the Lord Jesus.

The other Jonathan Edwards, very different, or was an 18th century Puritan American preacher and theologian, well known in particular in his theology that he had a theology of joy, and maybe not what you expected of a Puritan.

[1 : 4 4] But he believed in our Christian service to be really effective. We have to do it with a real joy in the Lord. I think his joy was probably particularly tested when at one point his congregation decided they didn't want him as their pastor anymore.

And one of the reasons for that, these things are always complicated, but one of the reasons for that was that Jonathan Edwards had decided that he wasn't going to admit anyone to take communion if they didn't have faith in Jesus.

It wasn't enough to have been baptized and to live a moral life. You had to have a faith in the Lord. And part of his reason for that was that he didn't want to be responsible for making people complacent about their salvation and people going to hell because they hadn't been told that they must have a faith in Jesus to be saved.

But because of that, and no doubt some other things, his congregation decided that they didn't want him anymore. And it was quite striking, I was reading what someone said when they had the kind of church counter, whatever it was.

Someone who was there said, his happiness was out of reach of his enemies, overbalancing all imaginable ills of life. So he was someone who, because of his faith, because of his stand for the gospel, was being rejected.

[3 : 0 5] But in all that, he had a joy, he had a peace, because he knew he was doing God's will. And Jonathan Edwards is known as a revival preacher. He saw many, many people coming to trust the Lord through him.

I think these two Jonathan Edwards are probably typical of the kind of thing that we're talking about this evening, the kind of person you're either faithless, that you don't follow through in your Christian life, you don't serve the Lord as you should, or you are faithful.

You endure hardship for the sake of the Lord Jesus. You are willing to suffer for your faith. Now, Paul clearly is in the second category, and he's encouraging Timothy to be the same.

A little bit of background before we dig into the passage. I'm sure if you've been here previous weeks, you remember, you may know anyway. This is the last letter of Paul that we have, writing to Timothy, his protégé, who had travelled round with him and had become his ambassador, particularly looking after churches in Ephesus.

And he is, as the title of his series says, he's passing on the baton. He's recognising that he's not got long to go in this world. He's in prison in Rome. He's about to go on trial for his life.

[4 : 16] And he wants to make sure the next generation continues the work of the gospel. And a lot of the book is reminding Timothy of reasons why he needs to keep going.

I'm trying to give him the fibre, the nerve, the faith to keep going and to endure despite everything. So in chapter 1, Paul reminds Timothy of his mother and his grandmother, his family situation, how they had taught him the gospel.

In chapter 3, he'll talk about the scriptures and how valuable and important they are. And in chapter 2, in the past we have just now, he focuses, particularly says, remember Jesus Christ.

That is the core of our faith. In the earlier verses of this chapter, Paul has used three analogies, three pictures of the Christian and how we should serve the Lord diligently.

We're to be like a soldier who gives up civilian life and dedicates himself to the service of the army. We're to be like an athlete who competes and competes fairly and within the rows for the prize.

[5 : 22] And we're to be like a farmer who works hard and diligently so he ends up getting a good crop. And Paul then seems to, I think, maybe imagine, well, would Timothy be asking, well, why?

Why is it that I have to do these things? Why is it that I have to endure all these things for the sake of the gospel? And this little section we're looking at this evening, I think, gives us the answer to the why.

Why should we endure as Christians? Why is it important that we keep going? And there are three things, essentially, that Paul says. He says we should keep going because of Jesus, because of all he is and all he means to us.

We should keep going because there are lots of people who haven't heard the good news and we want the gospel to reach everywhere. And we should keep going because ultimately, if we do, there's a reward for us that those who are faithful will ultimately receive a reward from God.

So we're looking at these three things. I've given them headings just to help remember them a bit. So we're going to look at a summary, a sacrifice, and a song. A summary, a sacrifice, and a song as my kind of headings for the three parts.

[6 : 37] So first is the summary, which is in verse 8, if you've got your Bible in front of you. Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.

This is my gospel. If in the recent past you've had the joy of being interviewed for membership of this church, there's a good chance that those of us who were interviewing you asked a question along the lines of, if a non-Christian friend asked you to explain your faith in just a few sentences, what would you say?

It's quite a good sentence, quite a good question to find out people's understanding of the gospel. Some people probably answer it better than we could, and they have a really good grasp of the gospel, a really good simple way of explaining it, perhaps because they already have tried to do that to their friends.

Others struggle a bit. But I don't think anyone has ever given us a nine-word answer. And that's what Paul does here. Nine words summarizing the gospel. Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.

I guess if someone had given us that answer, we might have said, well, can you expand on it a bit, explain a bit more what you mean. But it's actually a really good summary of the gospel message.

[7 : 54] So Paul says a number of things here that bring out the gospel. First, he says it's about Jesus Christ. Now, Paul, obviously, throughout Timothy, refers quite frequently to the Lord.

But every other time he does it in this letter, I think there are nine other times, he talks about Christ Jesus. Only here does he talk about Jesus Christ.

Now, he may be doing it just for variety, but it may be there's some significance in that. What does Jesus Christ mean? So the name Jesus was given to him means God saved.

It was given to him because he would save his people from their sins. So the first thing we need to know about the gospel is that Jesus is the Savior.

That Jesus went to the cross at Calvary. He took our sins on himself. He took the punishment that was due to us so that we wouldn't need to suffer it. He is our Savior.

[8 : 55] And alongside that, he is the Messiah. He is the Christ, the promised one from the Old Testament who would liberate his people and bring them into God's perfect peace.

Perhaps the Savior comes first. The sacrifice that the Lord Jesus made comes first. But alongside that, there's his triumph and all that he does for his people.

There are then two other statements that we'll take together. Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. I think there are two parallels that we can bring out in that.

The first is that Jesus is holy God and also holy human. So he was raised from the dead.

How was he raised from the dead? It was by the power of God. It was because he himself is God. At the start of Romans 1, in a passage which has quite a few parallels with the one we're looking at this evening, Paul says that Jesus was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.

[10 : 11] He was declared to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead. It is through the death of the Lord Jesus that we are saved, that we can come into a relationship with God.

It is his resurrection that gives us the absolute assurance that when he died, he was doing the will of God, and that he is who he said he was.

He is the Son of God become man. Jesus is truly God. But then Paul says he's also descended from David.

And that tells us that he is human. He has a family tree, albeit his family tree, and really goes back through his mother because he was conceived by the Spirit.

But he is perfectly human. He was a man just like us, except that he also was God and therefore was sinless and had God's power.

[11 : 06] So Paul says a key element of the gospel is that Jesus Christ is both God and man. And then secondly, again looking at these two little phrases, Paul says that Jesus is both living and reigning.

He was raised from the dead and is not said, but it's implied. He is still alive. He is a living Savior. He is our living Lord today. He is the one who died once and now is alive forevermore.

And the reference to David also, I'm sure, is intended to bring out the reign of Jesus. David was the greatest king of the Israelites in the Old Testament.

And Jesus descended from David as David's greater son is the one who reigns forever. He has been put in the highest place in heaven. One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

So Paul's brought out Jesus as Savior and Messiah. He's brought out that he's God and he's man. And he's brought out that he's alive today and he is reigning.

[12 : 24] That, says Paul, is my gospel. Of course, that is our gospel as well. And that should be a motivation to us to keep going and to endure in our Christian lives.

Because Jesus has died for us, because we have come into a relationship with him, because we know if we're Christians that our eternal future is secure. Our love for the Lord should be sufficient that we go and we tell others about him, even if that is difficult, even if that leads to suffering.

So that's our summary. Second thing I wanted to talk about was a sacrifice. So Paul's sacrifice comes out in verses 9 and 10.

Verse 9 he says, I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal, but God's word is not changed. God's word is not chained.

Paul was limited in what he could do in prison, particularly in the second imprisonment. The first imprisonment was more of a house arrest. This imprisonment, he really was in prison and was in chains.

[13 : 39] And yet he knew that despite the fact that he couldn't be out there proclaiming the gospel, through the power of God, through the power of the Spirit, the gospel would keep being preached.

People would keep being won for the Lord Jesus. Despite persecution, or in some ways almost because of persecution. Perhaps people would hear about Paul and hear about how gladly he suffered for the gospel and would say, well, what does that mean?

Why is he willing to do it? And that might lead them into Christian faith. And history tells us that the more humans try to stop the gospel and to prevent it being preached, the more it reaches out and people come to trust in Jesus.

Let me give you an example. This man here is called Robert Bruce, not Robert the Bruce, Robert Bruce. And he was a missionary in the 19th century to what was then Persia and is now Iran.

And he saw very little fruit evident for what he did. He labored for many years and he didn't really see a lot of blessing. So I think this is a very telling quote he says here.

[14 : 53] I'm not reaping the harvest. I scarcely claim to be sowing the seed. I am hardly plowing the soil, but I am gathering out the stone. So in other words, he's come to, figuratively, some waste ground that is no good for anything.

And he's trying to turn it into a field that can produce a crop. And he feels only just being able to do the first bit of it. Persia, Iran has over the centuries under Muslim rule been a really difficult place for the gospel.

And not many Christians for a very long time. But then look at this quote, which comes from a Christian organization working in Iran, or working in Asia generally.

The fastest growing church in the world can be found in Iran, a land which since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 has been opposed to Christianity.

Iran, as you know, is under a very fundamentalist Islam regime. And yet the gospel is flourishing. It's reckoned there are probably as many as a million Christians these days living in Iran.

[16 : 05] The leaders of the country have tried to stop the gospel, tried to crush Christianity. But the gospel can't be changed. And it is still blessing many.

And the methods of being able to communicate the gospel in Iran have changed. Yes, there's still demand for paper Bibles. But a lot of what happens today comes through radio or television, through the internet, through apps and phones.

That is how Christians in Iran find the scriptures and are disciplined through it, when it is so dangerous to be known as a Christian. But God's word is not chained.

And we may suffer, and it may seem that others who are opposed to the gospel are winning. But ultimately, God's word is powerful, and God's spirit is powerful, and even in the midst of persecution, people are being saved.

So Paul says, Paul is suffering so that others may come to know the Lord.

[17 : 18] For the sake of the elect, he says. Now, we're not going to go into the doctrine of predestination this evening, but just note that whatever your views are on that, the gospel needs to be preached.

People need to hear the word if they are to believe it and come to know Jesus. And Paul says, It's worth me suffering for the sake of the gospel, if through my preaching and if through my suffering, people may come to know the Lord Jesus, may come to faith in him, and may put their trust in the only one who can save them.

Our suffering doesn't save people. It's not the suffering of the Lord Jesus, which is able to bring salvation. But through our suffering, through our willingness to endure, despite whatever circumstances and opposition we face, then people will come to hear the gospel and will come to know the Lord Jesus.

And that should be a tremendous motivation for us. There are millions and millions of people out there who don't know the Lord Jesus. Perhaps have never heard the gospel. Are we able to talk to them about and to recognize that it is only through the preaching of the gospel and through the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives that they can come to know Jesus?

Paul says, I will endure everything for the sake of the elect. I look at myself and I think, well, can I say that? And probably the answer might be no.

[18 : 45] But we need to think, what is my commitment to the Lord Jesus? And what is my compassion for those who don't know him yet? Am I willing to suffer and to face opposition so that the gospel may flourish, so that people may come to faith in Jesus?

That's Paul's sacrifice. Paul's sacrifice, willing to suffer for the sake of the elect. And finally, what I've called a song.

So the last three verses are probably a first century hymn. We don't know for certain, but when Paul says at the beginning of verse 11, here's a trustworthy saying, he is always referring, when he uses that phrase, he's always referring to something that people would know and saying this is something that's worth listening to.

And most likely this was a hymn. It's the kind of structure you see in the Psalms where you get two lines and they kind of parallel or build on each other. It's very much in the form of Hebrew poetry and Hebrew songs.

So what does Paul say? In the first little couplet, he says that those who die with Christ will live with him.

[20 : 01] Those who endure with Christ will reign with him. In other words, if we are willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the Lord Jesus and the gospel, we won't lose out through it.

Ultimately, God will reward us for the things that we do and for our willingness to suffer for him. Not that our suffering brings us our salvation, that is only through the work of the Lord Jesus.

And yet there are rewards in heaven, and particular rewards for those who are faithful, for those who endure to the end. You may notice there's a bit of a parallel in these verses with what Paul said back in verse 8 when he talks about Jesus raised from the dead, descended from David.

So he says, if we've died with him, we will live with him, so we'll be raised like Christ was. If we endure, we will also reign with him, so we will have crowns of glory through our faithfulness to the gospel.

Paul later in 2 Timothy can say, I fought the good fight, I finished the race, I've 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.

[21 : 19] So if we'll die for Christ, we'll live with him. I don't think Paul here particularly has martyrdom in mind. Now, martyrdom was certainly on his mind as he was looking forward to his trial and knowing that it was likely to result in him being executed.

I think he's probably thinking more of the daily taking up our cross, denying ourselves, and following Jesus. Seeking to be dead to the sin and the things of this world and presenting our bodies wholly as living sacrifices for Christ.

It is the day-to-day dying to this world, I think, is the key focus here rather than martyrdom. And obviously that makes it more relevant for us. None of us will end up being martyred, though who knows, but certainly all of us are called to deny ourselves and to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

To receive our reward, our lives need to be dedicated to the Lord. We need to endure and not be fair-weather Christians who are happy to come to church and be with those who are like-minded but not willing in any way to make sacrifices for the sake of the gospel.

We need to keep going despite any difficulties we face and then we can know that we will qualify for Christ's commendation, well done, good and faithful servant, and the crown of righteousness that Paul talks about.

[22 : 47] That we will be rewarded, and we don't know exactly what that means yet, but we will be rewarded in some way in heaven for the works that we have done. And if our works are good, then we will see how blessed we are and that we have done them and we have made the right decisions in our lives.

And that then makes the second little couplet here quite sobering. Now this one isn't terribly easy to understand. There are quite a few different interpretations of it.

The comment in verse 12 about disowning Christ echoes something that Jesus himself said. In Matthew 10 verse 33, Jesus said, whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

I think it's probably best to understand this as referring to people who repeatedly and consistently disown Christ. So he's not referring here to the kind of situation that Peter faced, where Peter denied the Lord three times in the heat of the courtyard as he faced hostility round about him as he saw his Lord on trial and he caved in at that point, but was later restored by the Lord Jesus.

It's not these one-offs which may happen when we are put in a really difficult situation. It's those who repeatedly deny their faith, deny the Lord Jesus, and who maybe in the first instance were never really true believers at all.

[24 : 23] So if that's those who disown Christ and who he will disown, what about verse 13 and those who are faithless? There are a number of different interpretations I said of this verse.

It may be that Paul is effectively repeating what he said in verse 12, putting it a little bit different. So he's saying, if you disown Christ, that means you are faithless.

In that case, when it talks about Christ remaining faithful because he cannot disown himself, it's not talking about Christ being faithful in his love and his care and concern for us, so that is true.

It's talking about Christ being true to himself, he can't disown himself, and there must be consequences for sin. And if people haven't trusted in the Lord Jesus, if they've not got their faith in him, then they face eternal condemnation for that.

That is one possibility for this verse. A second possibility is Paul is looking at a different kind of failing the Lord Jesus here. So it's not people who consistently deny him and say, well, nothing to do with him, I've got nothing to do with Christian faith.

[25 : 36] It's more the Peter situation I talked about a minute ago. People who fall in some kind of way. Now that might be in denying the Lord Jesus in the kind of situation that Peter faced.

Or it might be just growing cold in our Christian lives and not obeying the Lord as we should. It might be falling into a particular sin and feeling real guilt about that.

And if that's the case, then what Paul was saying in this verse is yes, sometimes we are faithless. Yes, we're all sinners. We're all imperfect. But we have a faithful God.

And the one who's begun a good work in us will bring it to completion. And even though we fail him, when we repent, when we return to him and acknowledge our failure, there is always forgiveness.

There is always the opportunity to go back to fruitful Christian living. We may be faithful, faithless, but the Lord remains faithful.

[26 : 44] I'll leave it to you to think which of these interpretations is the better. I tend to slightly favor the second one, but I don't claim to be an expert in it. Actually, both are true. On the one hand, if people constantly deny the Lord Jesus, they don't really have a faith in him, then they can't expect him to acknowledge them.

They can't expect him to be unfaithful to his character and overlook sin that's not been forgiven. On the other hand, if we do know the Lord of our faith is in him and we fall away in some kind of way, then we know he is faithful.

He will always keep his promises. So it's been really challenging as well as encouraging teaching, I think, this evening. We're encouraged by the Lord Jesus as we think about him of all that he has done for us, that he is the living, reigning one who died for our sins but is alive and with us today.

I think we're probably challenged as we think about Paul and the suffering that he went through and saying, well, would I be willing to go through that as well? And maybe we're both encouraged and challenged by the thought of reward and of reward being withheld if we're not faithful to the Lord Jesus.

Let me finish, though, with another Scottish missionary. Sorry, we're going back again a long way. Another 19th century Scottish missionary. And this man is called William Chambers Burns. He looks quite Chinese there, but that's because he adopted Chinese costume when he went to be a missionary in China.

[28 : 19] William Chambers Burns worked for many years for the gospel in China with at times quite a lot of discouragement, but he had a huge influence on gospel mission in China, particularly through his character and through his absolute devotion to the Lord Jesus and the great work that he did.

One of the people who he particularly influenced was Hudson Taylor. Hudson Taylor, probably the best known of all missionaries to China, among other things, the founder of OMF or what has become OMF, which is the missionary organization that Danny is associated with.

There were three things in particular that William Chambers Burns passed on to Hudson Taylor. Taylor, remember, three things which are relevant to what we've been thinking about this evening.

The first is that God has a purpose in permitting our suffering. Our suffering isn't random. It is not something that's beyond God's control. It is not God in some ways being sadistic and allowing us to suffer.

There is always a purpose in our suffering. Sometimes it's to bring us back to Christ when perhaps we've fallen away. Sometimes it will be as a witness to others and to bring others to the Savior.

[29 : 36] Second thing that William Challenge Burns taught to Hudson Taylor is that evangelism is the great work of the church. church. The church is here primarily to make disciples for the Lord Jesus and we need to be evangelists to reach out to others for that, whatever the cost may be.

And then the third thing was that lay evangelists, those who aren't in ordained ministry, whatever you want to call it, aren't full-time Christian workers, are absolutely vital to the work of evangelism.

That you and I are the ones who are on the front line in many ways and we need to be very active in reaching others for the gospel. Here's the quote I want to finish with from William Chalmers Burns.

He said, I am ready to burn out for God. I am ready to endure any hardship if by any means I might save some. The longing of my heart is to make known my glorious Redeemer to those who never heard.

that's very much what Paul is saying to us in this passage. We should be ready to endure hardship so that others may come to know the Lord Jesus.

[30 : 52] And our great longing should be that our friends, our colleagues at work or at uni or wherever we are, that they too come to know the Lord and that we're willing to talk to them about our faith and to introduce them to our Saviour.

So let's go out with a determination to do that and to serve the Lord whatever the cost, knowing that God is no man's debtor and we will ultimately be rewarded many fold for anything that we do for the Saviour.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for this passage that Paul brings to us explaining to us why it is so important that we endure as Christians.

We pray that you will give us a greater love for the Lord Jesus, a greater desire that we may reach out to those who don't yet know him and a greater determination to please him and ultimately to reap the rewards for that.

We thank you for the glorious message of the Gospel. We thank you for the glorious Saviour that we have. We pray that we will be those who are faithful to him not those who are faithless.

[32 : 03] We thank you for our time together. We commit ourselves to you now in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.