

# Fully Alive for What Matters Most

## Opening

If you ever learn about the wonders of Ancient Rome, you'll hear historians speak about the marvels of that classical world such as Roman architecture, government, and *aqueducts*. And all the engineers said Amen. Roman emperors created an elaborate system of channeling water from outside cities and towns to supply the needs of the imperial city for household use, agriculture, and sewage. Cisterns were constructed throughout the city to supply and reserve water for these various uses, and one such cistern was built right beside the symbol of Rome's architectural brilliance and her imperial power—the Forum. The building was called the Tullianum and was meant to be a cistern for Rome's underground sewers, supplied by the Aqua Marcia. But sometime after the Aqua Marcia was constructed, the Tullianum was converted for another use by Rome. The Tullianum would not just be a cistern, it would become a "subterranean death cell" to incarcerate the Empire's most notorious criminals.<sup>1</sup> The Tullianum would later become known as Mamertine Prison.

Rebels of the Empire would not stay at Mamertine for very long. They were imprisoned there either to await an expedited trial or their scheduled execution. One did not descend stairs to this underground prison. Prisoners were lowered to Mamertine's floor through a hole in the roof. Once your feet hit bottom, good luck finding a place of your own in this crowded prison cell.

And it is from here in the dark and cramped floor of Mamertine's prison that holy tradition believes that Paul writes to one of his few brothers who hadn't abandoned him in the faith. To Timothy, from crowded and filthy Mamertine Prison, with the Aqua Marcia sewers on the other side of the wall, the Apostle Paul says, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal...I endure everything for the sake of the elect that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory."

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<sup>1</sup> Brian M. Raps me, *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 2000, 827-830.

# Suffering for the Sake of Others

To suffer the deprivation of Rome's most cruel prison is one thing; to suffer the deprivation and loss of friendships is another. Paul only has Luke, Onesiphorus, and Timothy left. "All who are in Asia turned away from me," Paul wrote in 1.15. He even names names: Phygelus and Hermogenes. Thus is the spiritual inheritance Phygelus and Hermogenes left to their descendants.

If ever there was a place where Paul would be haunted by the question 'was it worth it all?' Mamertine Prison was the place where those questions would surface. Noticeably absent in Paul's final words to Timothy is the question 'has it been worth it all?' Maybe he wrestled in the dark Mamertine nights with those questions like the Lord Jesus wrestled in Gethsemane with his approaching suffering, but there's no evidence in this letter that Paul flinched.

If there was a place to give way to bitterness or selfishness this would be it, too. But there is no bitterness or selfishness in Paul's message to Timothy. 'I endure everything *for the sake of the elect...*' To the end, Paul was turned outward. He is not seeking the 'carrion comfort' of self-pity. He gladly suffers for the sake of the churches that they may be worthy of the salvation won by Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

I remember a conversation some years ago about the tempting words Jesus heard while on the cross, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." Until this conversation I had never considered that it would be *more* difficult for Jesus to come down from the cross. We tend to think it would be easier because of the excruciating physical pain. But we don't consider that, to come down from the cross, Jesus would have to betray his entire heart and soul, all the days and years of prayer, surrendering himself to the Father's will, surrendering his life to glorify his Father. It would be to place his own desires before that of his Father's will.

I think the same is true of St Paul at the end of his life. He may be in Rome's destitute prison, he may be alone save a few faithful friends in the Gospel, but he would betray the very Gospel he proclaimed if suddenly he turned all the attention on himself. This is the same Paul who wrote to the church in Rome concerning his Jewish kinsmen, "For I wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen

according to the flesh.”<sup>2</sup> That’s no rhetorical flourish. The love of Christ had so transformed Paul in body, mind, and spirit that his heart burned with longing for others.

You may remember when we devoted a month of Sundays to Paul’s Letter to the Colossians, another letter written from prison, albeit a more hospitable Roman prison. In the days of his earlier imprisonment, probably under house arrest in Rome, Paul wrote to the Colossians his deep desire that he could “present everyone mature in Christ.” “For this I toil,” Paul wrote, “struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works in me.”

From the time his eyes were blinded on the Damascus Road, Paul had been engulfed in the mercy and love of God. He so immersed himself in the love of God that he toiled, struggled, labored *for the sake* of the elect in Christ Jesus. His whole life had been devoted to that end. That’s why he remains focused on others, even from the darkness of Rome’s deepest prison.

## Rigors of Spiritual Leadership

Paul may be bound in chains, but the Word of God is not bound. You read these words and you hear the strength of a man who is fully alive in his weakness. He has given himself to the things that matter most in this world: the Kingdom of God and the message of the Gospel.

As Paul has given his maximum effort for the Gospel, so he trains his apprentice, Timothy, to give *his* maximum effort, too. “Share in suffering as a good soldier in Christ Jesus.” He also speaks of the sacrifices an athlete makes to receive a crown; of the maximum labor a farmer invests for the sake of a harvest. “Think over what I say,” the teacher says to his student. Meditate on what it means to give all you have to this work and “the Lord will give you understanding in everything.”

I believe every young person wants to be addressed in this way. When all appearances suggest the contrary, remember that being made in the image of God means we were made

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 9.3

for *abundant* life, a fully alive life, serving God and something greater than ourselves. And here's the paradox of what it means to be fully alive: you might not feel fully alive until you're in the midst of suffering for something greater than yourself.

In the early years following World War II, the Christian philosopher Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy contrasted the cultural value of ease and comfort with the institutions that have sustained our common life. Rosenstock-Huussy wrote, "The curse of modern man is to become more and more non-committal for fear of going too far in any direction. He plays (it) safe, adopts a minimum attitude...(which) means no real excitement, no real devotion, no real fight, no real love." On the other hand, he continues, "The values and institutions on which we live were created by maximum effort. The philosophy of minimum life would never make possible one work of art, one song, one discovery, one free constitution. The future it advocates would see no children born, from sheer precaution; no sorrow felt, for fear of pain; no loyalty cherished, for fear of being old-fashioned." <sup>3</sup>

We were not saved by minimum effort. Our Lord Jesus gave his all for us. Our church was not planted with minimum effort. The ACNA was not established by minimum effort. I love the hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," but I feel like I need to confess my attitude of minimum effort before I sing the holy words of the final verse:

*Were the whole realm of Nature mine;  
That were an offering far too small,  
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all.*

Some hymns you sing as prayers, as an aspiration, asking that you could become worthy of the words. This is one of them. /

Finishing well in the Gospel means giving our maximum effort to Christ to the end. And for our younger saints, beginning well in the Gospel means cherishing the maximum effort of your elders and taking up the cross in *your* generation, living a life that is worthy of the calling.

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<sup>3</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, *The Christian Future, Or the Modern Mind Outrun*, 14.

Oh for the joy to live, labor, and serve in a tradition that is greater than you and will continue after you. There are so many opportunities, but I share a few examples.

Consider the noble tradition of nursing. Think not only of the rich heritage of heroes such as Florence Nightengale, but think of the need for good nurses today. Patricia Benner has written about how the technological advances in medicine can 'sideline the care of the whole person.' Nurses, with their humane care, become more acquainted with a person's story by nature of their work.

I have a cousin who had a number of great vocational opportunities, one of which was a career in aviation, yet she felt the summons of God to become a nurse for the glory of God. We have wonderful nurses in this congregation who have served patients for many years as if they were serving the Lord Jesus. Nurses give maximum effort and their profession is an institution worthy of lifelong devotion.

Every human being was made to be summoned into a work that requires their maximum effort to glorify the Lord Jesus, for the sake of others, to further his kingdom. Give your God-given talents to the Lord Jesus; give your energy and passion to the local church; become a good worker in a noble vocation in the world, whether it be nursing, teaching, engineering, homemaking, woodworking, finance, or any number of worthy professions. Share in the suffering of your elders in each of these ways so that our descendants will have a noble inheritance in the Lord.

## **Against Disputes & Quarrels**

I find one final topic in this passage worthy of our meditation today: the charge to refrain from quarrels about words. Here is a signature sudden shift in Paul's writings. From these high and lofty topics, we have an abrupt transition into daily conflicts. We read the words of affection for Timothy, Paul's openness about his suffering, his charge to his spiritual son, and then we're suddenly talking about talking in the churches.

"Charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers." But when we recall that Paul expects he's nearing his end, he's suffering for the

sake of Christ, he's entrusting this Gospel work to his apprentice, it makes a bit more sense. When you're near the end of something, your vision is clearer. You have a deeper conviction about what matters most in this life, which means you see most clearly how we waste energy on things like trying to win an argument. Ask anyone who has survived a health scare in their life. People who are near the end understand the difference between first things and second things.

Anglicans like a good argument. Probably too much. But rarely have our arguments, mediated more by social media in our time, represented the fruit of the Holy Spirit. We must heed the warning of our ancient pastor, the Apostle Paul that there is a consequence for constant quarrels about words: it ruins the hearers.

When I entered college, the amount of concerts I attended saw a noticeable increase. Small venues, mid size venues, large venues—if you love music and you're in your late teens/early 20s, you will end up at live music venues.

And in those smaller venues, you are likely standing listening to said performance next to a loud speaker. At first this is thrilling. You love the energy of the people around you, you're enjoying the songs of the band. The high volume works for you.

Go to enough live shows and eventually you'll find yourself conversing with someone, foolishly attempting a conversation next to the loud speaker. Your labor is in vain. If you continue attending live music into your junior and senior year, you begin to feel the blood pumping in your head during and after the live shows. This is when you notice the band is wearing ear plugs themselves. You begin to think the future of your hearing could be adversely effected if you don't begin wearing ear plugs yourself. You walk away from the speaker, your head thrumming, unable to hear yourself think.

If your ears are continually opened to the rancorous, corrosive political discourse of this decade, it is like standing next to a loud speaker at a live music show. The volume is ruining your hearing.

2 Timothy 2.14 would be an excellent desktop background, especially in the coming year of elections in the United States. "Do not quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers." If you had to read those words before you logged onto Facebook or

Twitter, before you joined a divisive discussion thread, you might preserve more peace in your life.

We must learn the wisdom of knowing when to walk away. In our age, we do not listen to one another with patience, a necessity for Christian conversation. When we are drawn into endless disputes, Paul suggests we are at risk of a spiritual hearing loss. If you regularly open your ears to rancorous words, how can you be sure your ears will be tuned to words of truth, goodness, and beauty? We must learn the wisdom of knowing when to walk away.

## Conclusion

To walk away from quarrels and disputes is just another manifestation of Paul's lifelong conviction: to live a life turned toward Christ, for the sake of others. Life is too short to give ourselves to superficial efforts and debates. We have received the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, a Gospel that calls for our maximum devotion to Christ, his Church, and the work he calls us to do. Let us give ourselves totally to the Lord, for it is His love alone, "so amazing, so divine, (that) demands my life, my soul, my all." In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.