

1 TIMOTHY 6:13-16

A PORTRAIT OF OBEDIENCE

“I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.”¹

The text before us is one sentence in the original language. It leaves the impression that the Apostle began to speak and became so excited that he forgot to take a breath. After presenting a charge to the young preacher, Paul moves into one of the most beautiful and moving doxologies to be found in any of his writings. The sentence he pens is pregnant with great theology that will instruct the one who takes time to work through what has been written. And that is our goal of this message today; endeavouring to learn something of the Person of Our God and Saviour, discovering in the process an appropriate response to His Person.

Take note that Paul’s charge is specifically addressed to Timothy. The second person singular pronoun is found in many manuscripts; however, it is missing from some of the most important and earliest manuscripts. We expect the pronoun to be present; but it isn’t present in many of the earliest manuscripts.² If the command is not directed to Timothy, as we anticipate, it would indicate that Paul was issuing a generalised command that is applicable to all Christians. Scholars cannot decide whether the pronoun should be present or not. Its presence fits with the tenor of the letter; and that could account for it being inserted by a scribe at some point. If it is a scribal error, it may indicate that the all Christians are to take the charge personally. I believe that the charge is directed to Timothy even though the required pronoun is absent. I further believe that the charge is applicable to all Christians—especially to elders as they conduct their service before the Lord God. With this understanding, join me in examining what Paul wrote, applying the charge to our own lives. The flock of God is called to hold elders accountable to what is written; and the elders must take the charge delivered in all seriousness.

A PORTRAIT OF GOD — “I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things...” Five times Paul issues a charge to Timothy. We need to take a moment to think through this business of the charge. The word translated “I charge,” is a compound word from Greek words that mean “along” [*pará*] and “announce” [*angéllō*]. When they are combined, they carry the meaning of passing along a message to someone. With time—by the time Paul was writing—the word had come to carry more weight, being used of an authoritative announcement or command. This particular word was used in a military setting, carrying considerable weight.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, Allen Wikgren, Barbara Aland and Johannes Karavidopoulos, **The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition (with Apparatus): The Greek New Testament, 4th Revised Edition (with Apparatus)** (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 2000); see also Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, **Universität Münster. Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung. Novum Testamentum Graece. 27. Aufl., rev.** (Deutsche Biblestiftung, Stuttgart 1993)

It will be beneficial to review other instances of the use of this word in this letter. Paul first used the word as he began writing this letter. “As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions” [1 TIMOTHY 1:3-7]. Timothy is not to offer suggestions in his role as an elder; he is to speak boldly and with all the authority of the Apostle himself. The pastor is to hold those who imagine themselves to be teachers accountable to the Word.

The second use of the word is found in 1 TIMOTHY 4:11—“Command and teach these things.” Though the Apostle’s charge to Timothy in this instance refers to all the matters that have preceded in this letter, “these things” focuses especially on the admonitions that are recorded in VERSES SEVEN THROUGH TEN. The previous admonitions speak of Christian conduct, pastoral relations with the flock and the things he is to teach. His teaching is to be of such spiritual depth that he exhibits maturity both in his lifestyle and in building up the people of God. His goal is to produce strong saints that walk in love and stand firm in the Faith.

In 1 TIMOTHY 5:7, 8 the Apostle appends additional material that is to be taught. He writes, “Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” He is insistent that believers are to accept responsibility for their own family. The church is not to be a welfare agency for every individual in the community; each believer is to assume responsibility for his/her own family.

Shortly, the Apostle will give the pastor instructions to warn the rich when he writes, “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life” [1 TIMOTHY 6:17-19].

Now, Paul issues a solemn charge, appealing to the presence of two witnesses—“God, who gives life to all things” and “Christ Jesus.” The first witness and the source of the charge is God Himself; and we should examine what the Apostle has said concerning God in order to gain an understanding of the revelation provided.

With this appeal the Apostle is giving us a snapshot of God. You know quite well that a snapshot captures a moment in time rather than giving a complete revelation of the person or thing portrayed. A snapshot of an individual tells us something of how that individual may appear, but it can tell us little of what the individual is thinking. In a sense, Paul is giving us a snapshot of God. To get a complete understanding of all that God would reveal of Himself, it is necessary to read the full revelation He has provided in the Word. However, the portrait we are given significantly advances our understanding of God.

Paul’s charge “in the presence of God” is a common statement in the Apostle’s writings. In 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-4 Paul writes, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is *pleasing in the sight of God our Savior*, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

In the fifth chapter of this book, Paul writes, “If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing *in the sight of God*” [1 TIMOTHY 5:4].

Shortly before writing the words of our text, the Apostle charged Timothy, appealing to our labours before the Lord our God. “*In the presence of God* and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality” [1 TIMOTHY 5:21].

In his second letter to Timothy, the Apostle makes similar appeals. In 2 TIMOTHY 2:14 Paul instructs Timothy, “Remind them of these things, and *charge them before God* not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.”

One final example will suffice to make an important point. Drawing this second missive to a conclusion, Paul issues a charge that is frequently used when presenting a charge to an ordinand. “I charge you *in the presence of God* and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” [2 TIMOTHY 4:1, 2].

I’m fully cognizant that some of the statements just cited appeal also to the presence of Christ Jesus; and we will take up that matter shortly. However, the focus for the moment is the presence of God. Our service, our life, is carried out before the True and Living God. Whether we honour Him, or whether we live for our own convenience, He sees us.

Were it only that God witnesses our actions, the thought would be intimidating enough. However, God is able to examine the heart, exposing motives and attitudes. Though we may mask from the watchful gaze of other people the rationale behind whatever we do, God sees and knows. Is that not the thrust of what is written in the Letter to Hebrew Christians? “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” [HEBREWS 4:12].

Paul appealed to this divine knowledge when he cautioned the Corinthian Christians against judging fellow believers. “Do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God” [1 CORINTHIANS 4:5].

We should not imagine that this divine knowledge of thoughts and motives is a doctrine found only in the New Testament. Hanani the Seer spoke the words of the LORD to Asa, King of Judah, these solemn words, “The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him” [2 CHRONICLES 16:9].

As well, we are compelled to recall the words of the Wise Man.

“The eyes of the LORD are in every place,
keeping watch on the evil and the good.”

[PROVERBS 15:3]

The Psalmist informs readers that “[God] knows the secrets of the heart” [PSALM 44:21]. In yet another of the Psalms, we learn, “[The LORD] knows the thought of man” [PSALM 94:11]. This is sobering knowledge for anyone; but Christians, especially, should realise that they conduct their lives before the watching eyes of the True and Living God. He knows us and He knows why we do the things we do. If we act out of personal self-interest or if we act out of a desire for His glory, He knows.

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I know that I am iterating what I've already said, but you must understand that I stress this truth because we need to remember that we conduct our lives in the presence of God. Whether we glorify His Name or whether we disgrace His cause, we are in the presence of God. Whether we are obedient to His Word or whether we walk in our own wilful way, we are always in the presence of God. This knowledge serves as a restraint on impetuous behaviour; it keeps us from acting impulsively. Those professing believers who dishonour the Lord, claiming to be free, act without awareness of His presence. However, we are always in the presence of the Lord God; and never is this more true than when we are assembled as a congregation in the House of the Lord. Now, the Lord our God is examining hearts and minds as we worship.

Note Paul's use of the presence tense when speaking of God's presence. This indicates that he is not focused on creation itself. Though God did create all things, the emphasis of the Paul's sentence is God's sustaining power to ensure life. To be certain, God gives life—let that sink in, He makes alive and He preserves life. Certainly, the Apostle understood both concepts; and it would be reasonable to conclude that he had both ideas in mind as he wrote those words.

Recall Paul's assertion to the Athenians, "[God] Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" [ACTS 17:25b]. In making this claim, Paul is echoing Elihu, who testified,

"The Spirit of God has made me,
and the breath of the Almighty gives me life."

[JOB 33:4]

Later, quoting Epimenides of Crete, Paul boldly stated of God, "In Him we live and move and have our being" [ACTS 17:28a]. Again, the Apostle echoes Job, who confessed,

"In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of all mankind."

[JOB 12:10]

The Psalmist, writing of God's creative work, speaks of creation of the heavens, the earth, the seas and the mountains. He speaks of God's provision of water and fodder for the animals of the fields. He looks to the moon and the sun as God's provision to mark the seasons and the rotation of the earth to give us night and day. Having spoken of animals and birds and fish, he then testifies:

"These all look to you,
to give them their food in due season.
When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your Spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground."

[PSALM 104:27-30]

This means that it is not within our purview to invade the womb and slaughter the unborn since God has given that life. Though we imagine that we know all there is to know about the generation of life, our arrogance testifies against us. Solomon was correct when he wrote:

“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.”

[PSALM 127:3]

Moreover, since God gives life, we are compelled to confess that He determines when our days shall end. For the child of God, that knowledge is a comfort. For those without hope in this dying world, that same knowledge is a source of deep despair.

The child of God who walks with the True and Living God in divine concourse, fears neither life nor death. He faces his days with equanimity. He exults with David:

“I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, ‘You are my God.’
My times are in your hand!”

[PSALM 31:14, 15]

A PORTRAIT OF THE CHRIST — “I charge you in the presence of ... Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The second witness before whom the Apostle delivers his charge is Christ Jesus. Though Paul might have spoken of many aspects of Jesus’ being, he focuses on His testimony before Pontius Pilate, calling that testimony “the good confession.” The Apostle could have spoken of Jesus’ power or His knowledge or His wisdom. He was not in the least hesitant in speaking of these aspects of Jesus’ character. Concerning Christ’s deity, Paul boldly ascribes to Him the position of very God when he writes of the Jewish people, “To [the Jews] belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen” [ROMANS 9:5].

His statement concerning Christ that he penned to Colossian Christians is equally strong. “[Christ Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” [COLOSSIANS 1:15-20].

In a similar manner, the Apostle was not in the least abashed in proclaiming either the omniscience or the omnisapience of the Christ. Recall what he wrote in the second chapter of Colossians. “I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” [COLOSSIANS 2:1-3].

His testimony in this Colossian Letter mirrors what he wrote in the Ephesian Encyclical. “In [Christ the Lord] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” [EPHESIANS 1:7-10].

Jesus knew the people of His day, as revealed in this insightful statement in the Gospels. “Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to [the crowd], because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man” [JOHN 2:24, 25]. That is a powerful testimony of knowledge; and these are powerful testimonies of wisdom. However, the Master’s wisdom and power were not the focus of Paul when he wrote of His presence.

Paul focuses on Jesus’ testimony before Pilate. Before the Roman governor, Jesus gave testimony; and part of His abbreviated response to the governor is identified as “the good confession.” One facet of Jesus’ appearance before Pilate is recorded in each of the Gospels. Let’s put together the relevant passages to discover what Paul is referring to.

“Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews’” [MATTHEW 27:11]?

Mark, written perhaps before Matthew was recorded, notes the identical question. “Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews’” [MARK 15:2]?

For completeness’ sake, note Luke’s account of Pilate’s question of the Master. “Pilate asked him, Are you the King of the Jews” [LUKE 23:3]?

Now contrast these synoptic accounts to what John has written. John frames the query somewhat differently, though maintaining the essence. “Pilate said to him, ‘So you are a king’” [JOHN 18:37]?

Matthew, Mark and Luke are agreed in presenting Jesus’ answer to the question: “You have said so.”³ Quite bluntly, Jesus responded, “You say.” John alone gives us an extended account of Jesus’ response. “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice” [JOHN 18:37 b].

What Paul has written is not as obvious in our English tongue as it was in the Greek. Jesus said before Pilate that He came “to bear witness to the truth.” The word translated “bear witness” is the Greek word *marturēō*; it is the same word translated “testimony” in our text. Jesus did not merely “confess the good confession,” He gave witness of the type of confession those who would follow Him would be called to make. He affirmed the truth, even though His affirmation would cost Him His life. Thus, the emphasis to Timothy is the need to “confess the good confession,” regardless of the outcome. Not even death should dissuade the child of God from holding fast to the truth. Jesus said, “Let your word ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’” [MATTHEW 5:37].⁴

So, the focus of the charge is the presence of the Divine witnesses—God the Father and Jesus the Son. The encouragement that comes from their presence with the people of God is that God is the source and the sustainer of life and Jesus has modelled bold witness.

Christians serve in the presence of the Son of God. Just as God the Father observes our service, so the Son of God is ever watching us in our labours. The Revelator saw the Risen Christ during his exile. The account is given in REVELATION 1:13-20.

³ MATTHEW 27:11; MARK 15:2; LUKE 23:3

⁴ The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2009)

“In the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.’”

Notice that the Master is standing in the midst of His churches; and He holds His messengers in His hand. Whenever we meet, Jesus the Master is walking among us, observing our worship. The one appointed by God to occupy the sacred desk is held in the hand of the One who appointed him. Similarly, whenever you fulfil the ministry to which He has assigned you, He watches you, seeing you in your work. This is the reason His eyes are “like a flame of fire”; He is searching the heart to reveal the thoughts and intentions residing there.

I know that we have all read these words found in the Letter to Hebrew Christians that speak of the searching of the heart by the Word of God. “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” The verse that follows is sobering in light of the presence of Christ as we conduct our various ministries. The Word cautions, “No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” [HEBREWS 4:12, 13].

To be certain, were we to make a verbal portrait of the Saviour, many facets would immediately suggest themselves. However, in light of the command Paul is about to issue, it is vital to focus on the Master’s ability to see our heart. I stress that this is at once a comfort and a terror. It is a comfort to the soul that seeks to honour Him. I know that I shall never fulfil my service perfectly; I will fail in many ways. Perhaps you will remember the humbling words Jesus spoke to the disciples. “When you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” [LUKE 17:10]. Yet, He knows the heart; He sees our desire to honour Him, and He rewards us according to our love for Him. To be certain, there is terror for those who are slovenly and slipshod in fulfilling the work.

THE CHARGE — “Keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.”

The charge is to be received and then kept “unstained and free from reproach.” The command is to be received “unstained,” or “spotless.” Our Lord Jesus is presented as “a lamb without blemish or spot” [1 PETER 1:19]. He is our example; thus, we are to keep ourselves spotless. James instructs us that “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” [JAMES 1:27]. Peter urges us to “Be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish” [2 PETER 3:14].

Just as the command is to be kept unstained, so we are to be “free from reproach” in how we keep the command. This requirement should be no surprise since the elder is to be “above reproach” [1 TIMOTHY 3:2]. This term, as discussed in earlier studies, serves as an overarching qualification for eldership—it includes all the characteristics listed in the third chapter of the Book.⁵ The particular word Paul used implies that there must be no ground of accusation when the command is kept; it speaks of conduct that is above criticism.⁶

The service required from the man of God is not to be compared to a sprint—it is a marathon. “There is no discharge from war,” was Solomon’s testimony [see ECCLESIASTES 8:8]. Though it may seem controversial to say, it is nevertheless true that an elder does not serve at the pleasure of the congregation; he serves Christ the Eternal God. Because the One who appointed Him is eternal, his service continues until the Master removes Him or until the Master returns.

The Apostle states that the command is to be maintained “unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The service of the elder is to exude an air of anticipation. Christ has promised to return, and His servant must always be watching for that glorious event. The same concept of maintaining one’s purity while waiting for the return of the Master is also emphasised as Paul writes Titus. “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” [TITUS 2:11-14].

The man of God is to remain faithful all his days, declaring the whole truth of God without prejudice and without compromise. He is to speak boldly, knowing that God has many people who have yet to hear the message of life, and knowing that the flock seek nourishment, refreshment and rest. He is to be ever watchful, knowing that savage enemies of the Faith constantly endeavour to infiltrate the flock to kill and destroy. He must know that he is susceptible to weariness, to fear and even cowardice, should he attempt to stand in his own strength.

Now, what is the commandment? What is it that Timothy is to guard, to watch and defend, ensuring that his life and conduct is unstained and without reproach? All sorts of speculation are advanced concerning what Paul meant when he referred to “the commandment.” I’m quite certain that Paul was urging Timothy to maintain the moral precepts of the Faith. This Faith in its entirety is seen as a new law in contrast to the rules and regulations of the Old Covenant.⁷ Therefore, we understand that Paul is urging fidelity to the Faith—both the teaching of the doctrines of the Faith and the manner in which Timothy fulfils His ministry. He is urging Timothy to prosecute faithfully His service received from the Master.

⁵ Michael Stark, “Titus 1:5-9: Appointing Elders in Every Town,” sermon preached 25 August, 2013, <http://newbeginningsbaptist.ca/clientimages/42652/sermonarchive/titus%201.05-09%20appointing%20elders%20in%20every%20town.pdf>

⁶ Cf. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains** (United Bible Societies, New York 1996); Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller, **Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament** (Baker’s Greek New Testament Library, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI 2000)

⁷ William F. Arndt, Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: a Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer’s Griechisch-Dautesches Worterbuch Zu Literatur** (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL 1979) 269; see also Joseph Henry Thayer, **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimm’s Wilke’s Clavis Novi Testamenti** (Harper & Brothers, New York, NY 1889) 218

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I have lived many years, perhaps more years than I could have imagined when I began serving the Lord God. During those years, I have witnessed a dreary parade of men who started well in service to the Lord, only to end their days in dismal failure. I have learned not to boast of my prowess or my ability—God has enabled me to stand firm. I have nothing of which to boast. I do confess that I fear dishonouring the Master—in fact, it is my greatest fear. Robertson McQuilkin has written a poem that speaks of my fears and of my dependence upon the Master.

It's sundown, Lord.
The shadows of my life stretch back
 into the dimness of the years long spent.
I fear not death, for that grim foe betrays himself at last,
 thrusting me forever into life:
life with You, unsoiled and free.
But I do fear.
I fear the dark specter may come too soon—
 or do I mean too late?
I fear that should end before I finish
 or finish, but not well,
That I might stain Your honor, shame Your name,
 grieve Your loving heart.
Few, they tell me, finish well.
Lord, let me get home before dark.

The darkness of a spirit
 grown mean and small, fruit shriveled on the vine,
 bitter to the taste of my companions,
 burden to be borne by those brave few who love me still.
No, Lord, let the fruit grow lush and sweet,
 a joy to all who taste;
Spirit—sign of God at work,
 stronger, fuller, brighter at the end.
Lord, let me get home before dark.

The darkness of tattered gifts,
 rust-locked, half-spent or ill-spent
A life that once was used of God
 now set aside.
Grief for glories gone or
Fretting for a task God never gave.
Mourning in the hollow chambers of memory,
Gazing on the faded banners of victories long gone,
Cannot I run well until the end?
Lord, let me get home before dark.

The outer me decays—
I do not fret or ask reprieve.

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The ebbing strength but weans me from mother earth
and grows me up for heaven.
I do not cling to shadows cast by mortality.
I do not patch the scaffold lent to build the real, eternal me.
I do not clutch about me my cocoon,
vainly struggling to hold hostage
a free spirit pressing to be born.
But will I reach the gate
in lingering pain, body distorted, grotesque?
Or will it be a mind
wandering untethered among light
phantasies or grim terrors?
Of Your grace, Father, I humbly ask...
Let me get home before dark.”⁸

Here is the sum of the message: Churches in the western world appear to be in retreat. The professed people of God are indistinguishable from the world. We claim that we want to see great victories against the enemies of the Faith, but we don’t want these victories to be costly. Personal religion has been reduced to a private affair that has no impact on daily life. In this strange form of life, we mirror the world.

If we will see victories, they will be in the small, daily skirmishes each believer fights in unseen places. Standing firm, refusing to laugh at salacious comments of friends and colleagues, declining to watch lascivious presentations on television or to listen to off-colour songs the child of God makes a stand for righteousness. Praying in the Spirit, pleading with lost family members to believe the message of life and speaking of one’s faith in the Risen Son of God, the Christian secures a beachhead for the Faith. It is in the minutiae of life that we make a change.

The world grows ever darker as the professed people of God appear to be in retreat. At such times, the child of God is given opportunity to make the greatest impact. Living a holy life, pursuing righteousness, seizing the great teachings of the Faith, each of us is given opportunity to “shine like the brightness of the sky above.” In living thusly, we will turn many to righteousness; in honouring God in this manner, we shall shine “like the stars forever and ever” [see **DANIEL 12:3**].

I’m addressing people who are fighting multiple skirmishes on every front. For most of us, it doesn’t seem that we are accomplishing much. We question whether we are winning. Let me encourage you, and in the process encourage my own heart. The Risen Master spoke to the saints in Smyrna, and the message was just as truly for us. “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” [**REVELATION 2:10, 11**].

I read the back of the book, and I understand that Christ is victor. “I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

⁸ Robertson McQuilkin is president emeritus of Columbia International University. This prayer in the form of a poem is included in hundreds of publications worldwide. This version is found on the Reach Out Columbia website, <http://www.reachoutcolumbia.com/articles/mar08-poetry-mcquilkin/>

1 TIMOTHY 6:13-16
GOD WHO DWELLS IN UNAPPROACHABLE LIGHT

‘Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;
it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure’—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

“And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the true words of God’” [REVELATION 19:6-9].

I find the imagery thrilling in the extreme, for I read: “I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords” [REVELATION 19:11-16].

“To Him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen” [1 TIMOTHY 6:16b]. Amen, indeed. Are you ready?