

Do you ever have a CD track going on in your head, that plays a worst case scenario for the United States of America? I do. Here is what has been playing in my head the past few months. Open Borders where drug dealers and terrorists can cross into the US from Mexico, and do much harm to our country. A liberal supreme court for the next 40 years that will take away tax exempt status from churches and any funding from Christian Day schools, along with altering our 2nd amendment rights. A socialist government, where the elite feel they know more than you how to manage your life. And they will manage your life. They will tell you what is the right way to think and act. A single payer health care plan where they will determine what type of medical care you are to receive. The federal deficit finally coming home to destroy. The confiscation of any savings you have in the bank, and your stock holdings. Boy, has the devil been having a field day in my mind. Has he ever done that with you?

Recently, I spoke with some pastors at our conference in Orlando, as to what they are doing, besides praying, for our country. I wanted to see what Scriptures, they were focusing in on, to bring a calmness and peace to their hearts. One of the pastors told me to check out what the apostle Paul had to say on the matter. If there was one person in Bible times, who could have been Mr. Negative, it was Paul. But this guy, was Mr. Thumbs Up, Mr. Positive, even though there was some real darkness on the horizon. He gives us some wonderful advice on how to stay positive in these uncertain times. Let's be people at Open Bible who: "Face The Future With Confidence!"

Paul is in Rome in prison. He knows it won't be long before the Roman guards take him out of his prison cell to the place of his execution. The henchman will sever his head from his body. Blood will pour out on the ground. He describes his death as a drink offering. In some of the Old Testament sacrifices wine was poured out on the lamb or bull as it was being sacrificed. As the wine hit the burning coals, it evaporated and a sweet smell rose from the altar. A sweet smell would rise to heaven with Paul's death. Paul considered it an honor to shed his blood for Jesus, because Jesus had shed his blood for him at the cross. Thumbs up if you die for Jesus! Temporary pain, eternal gain.

Paul also speaks of his death as a departure. The word for departure has the thought of untying something or letting it lose. Ships were untied so they could set sail. Tents were untied so you could move on to a new location. Paul wrote to the people of Corinth, "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not made by human hands." We are homeless people living each day in temporary circumstances until we are released to enter into the eternal house that our Lord Jesus has prepared for us. The Lord knows exactly how many heart beats of time you have left on this earth. He knows exactly when you will pick up your tent and move from the earthly campground to the heavenly campground. Thumbs up. Death a departure to the heavenly campground.

Paul had no regrets as he looked at the life he was privileged to live for the Lord. "I have fought the good fight, The word here for fight is the Greek word agonizo from which we get our word "agony." Paul had his share of agonizing struggles. He tells us that he was tossed into prison frequently. Five times he received from the Jews, the 40 lashes minus one, a severe beating where a whip with pieces of bone dug into your back. Three times Paul was beaten with rods, once they stoned him, three times he was shipwrecked. He was constantly on the move, always looking over his shoulder as to who was out to get him. He often went without food, had many sleepless nights, plus he had a

lot of pressures from the different churches he had started. Whatever else you can say about Paul, you can't say he had an easy life.

He spoke in Romans 7 of the daily struggle he had with his weak sinful flesh. You can relate to that. In spite of all the struggles and even the failures which he acknowledged he has no regrets. He is proud of what he was able to accomplish because it was all done through the power which his ascended Lord Jesus provided him. He said in Philippians, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

He was confident his sinful past was forgiven including his terrible persecution of his fellow Jews who had become Christians. To be sure he may still have had flashbacks to little children screaming: "Mommy and daddy." He tore men and women from their homes, bound them and took them back to Jerusalem to be put to death by. He wrote to the citizens in Rome, "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." At the end of an agonizing day of trying to live our lives for Christ and struggling with our sinful flesh we fall asleep at night with the assurance that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. Paul knows the past is forgiven.

He also knows the future is secure as he looks forward to his crown of righteousness. "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will award to me on that day. Just think, the Lord has a crown of righteousness stored up for you.

That word "in store for you" brought back memories of my childhood. I knew a family that had a large garden. Their mother put huge amounts of fruit and vegetables into canning jars which were stored on shelves in the basement of their home. Many times her children were told to go down to the basement and bring up a jar of green beans, or corn, or pickles, or applesauce, or tomatoes. Jesus has something better for us than a jar of beans, or pickles. Jesus has a crown of righteousness stored up for you, waiting on the shelf if you will, and he won't forget to give it to you on the last day.

How do you qualify for this crown of righteousness or crown of glory? Paul says, "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." How do you get a trophy or crown of righteousness on the last day? It certainly can't be on the basis of how well you have performed your life here on this earth. Take a picture of any part of your life this past week. Use a high definition camera. You will see that even in your shining moments you will see yourself falling short of God's glory. Paul knew he did not have a righteousness that could qualify him for the crown. That is why he tells us in Philippians 3, "That I might gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ."

You see, Jesus lived a perfect life while he was here. Jesus was our substitute. Because of his perfect life, when God the Father, looks at us for the sake of Jesus, he sees us as righteous and pure, even while we are on this earth. But still, while on this earth, we make mistakes and mess up. But Jesus says, rest assured, when you reach heaven, you will be righteous around the clock No more mistakes. Righteous around the clock.

Paul was looking forward to wearing that crown with all those who have longed for his appearing. How we long for Jesus to return in glory, even now before this church service comes to an end. We long to spend eternity with those who will someday join us because of their faith in Jesus. "After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be

with the Lord forever.” Such is our confidence. Such is our hope.

What if the Lord delays his return? What if really hard times come for you in the future? Paul has words of comfort for any tribulations that life may bring to you before Jesus returns. “At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.” Paul had his glorious moments in life when dear Christians offered him tremendous support and encouragement. We think of that time when he said goodbye to the Christians in Ephesus. He knelt down and prayed. Then they wept as they embraced him and kissed him. Then there were the sad and lonely times when people seemed to forget him. Later in this letter to Timothy he writes, “Only Luke is with me.” The Lord gave him the strength to forgive those who failed him.

You may have had times in your life when a group of Christians was there to give you support in a difficult time in your life. These people called you on the phone, visited with you, ran errands for you, and shared comforting words from Scripture. Then you may have had times like Paul when no one was there to help you. Your kids were up in the Midwest somewhere, and had their own lives. You didn’t have any close Christian friends for support. Your spouse died, and you were virtually alone. How did you handle that situation.

Paul knew he was not alone. There is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper. “But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.” Sitting in prison gave Paul lots of time to reflect on how the Lord had been there for him in difficult times. I wonder how often this Hebrew of the Hebrews who probably knew most of the psalms from memory prayed the words of Psalm 46 to himself, “God is our Refuge and Strength an every present help in trouble.” He knew Jesus as his Lord and God. He knew the risen and ascended Lord Jesus who appeared to him on the road to Damascus was taking care of his church. He writes confidently, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever.”

Is it any wonder then why Martin Luther said the Christian is always an optimist? There will be hard days of great tribulation for all of us. The Lord Jesus knows those days and has already planned how he is going to stand by your side just as he did for Paul.

I am going to close this sermon by having you say something with me that expresses our confidence and hope after hearing these words from the inspired pen of the Apostle Paul. Here are the words. Listen to them. “The past is forgiven. The future is guaranteed. The present is exciting.” Face the Future With Confidence. Fear not little flock, the Lord has given you the kingdom. Amen.