

## Certainty

20th Sun. after Pentecost – 10/23/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 Pastor Keith Besel

### **Introduction**

- ⊠ How can you be so sure Paul? That's the question that comes to mind when I think about the words of our Epistle Reading today. "How can you be so sure?"
  - ➔ In this text, we essentially have the final known recorded words of the apostle Paul. Paul is in prison when he writes these words to Timothy, and he absolutely believes that his earthly life is quickly drawing to a close. Of course, he had no way of knowing if he would actually die in the immediate future, but he believes his time has come. Verse six, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering and the time of my departure has come".
- ⊠ So, amazingly, despite all the uncertainty about his situation, as he sits in prison, waiting for his chance to be heard by the Roman rulers, and the uncertainty that comes anytime the topic of death comes up, Paul shows here that he is full of certainty as he closes his letter to Timothy.
  - ➔ There is no doubt in his mind as he says in verse 18, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom". And that's not all. Earlier in verse 8, with the same kind of certainty, Paul says that he is sure that Jesus, "the righteous judge," will award him "the crown of righteousness" in the resurrection on the Last Day. So my original question still stands, "How can Paul be so sure?"
- ⊠ In this world where so much is uncertain; where it seems as if we can never be sure about anything, I think it's safe to say that this kind of certainty is what we all want, isn't it? Especially as we face the prospect of our own death someday. We all want to have Paul's kind of certainty.
- ⊠ To understand how Paul arrived at the place of certainty we see in this text, we need to review his life a bit to see how Paul could be so sure that Jesus would rescue him from every evil and award him the crown of righteousness on the Last Day?
  - ➔ To do that, we are going to need to explore a number of possible answers to this question and let God's Word help us find God's answer to Paul's certainty. Doing this will lead us to see how God can inform and instill within us the same certainty as well.

### **I. Possible answer #1: Certainty based on Conversion Experience**

- ⊠ If we're going to look back at Paul's life and ministry to try to find the source of his certainty, the best place to start is probably at the beginning with Paul's conversion in Acts, chapter 9. It was quite remarkable. On his way to Damascus to arrest Christians for future persecution and torture, Jesus literally knocks Paul to the ground with a blinding flash of light. That had to leave an indelible mark on his life and ministry. So, could this be what made him so sure?
  - ➔ In fact many Christians try to find certainty this way, focusing on their own conversion experiences; upon the transformation in their lives that took place immediately after they were brought to faith.
- ⊠ But you see, while Paul's conversion was remarkable, it could not provide absolute certainty. Let's consider this logically: If this one positive experience was the source of Paul's certainty, then the countless negative experiences in his life would work to counteract his certainty and grow doubt instead, right? Paul even says in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, "We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened

beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death”.

→ Even after Paul’s radical transformation, we see in Romans 7 how much he still struggled with sin. “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate,” Paul says. So, this can’t be the source of certainty.

## **II. Possible answer #2: Certainty based on his success.**

✘ After his conversion, Jesus commissioned Paul to be His apostle to the Gentiles. Paul embraced Christ’s call; traveling far and wide; proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. He was incredibly successful to the point that he is considered to be one of the greatest evangelists of all time. So is his success what gave Paul his certainty?

→ This is one of the most common ways that people – Christian and non-Christian alike – try to find certainty in life. They look at their accomplishments in life, the good works they’ve done as the source of reassurance.

✘ Although Paul was very “successful,” this couldn’t ultimately give him any real certainty. Remember, Paul wasn’t always “successful” in the eyes of the world. In Acts 17 Paul preached to a gathering of philosophers and pagan religious thinkers at the Areopagus in Athens. And although we lift up his actions and words there as a model for engaging the culture with Christ, as far as we can tell, only a small group “joined him and believed” (Acts 17:33) while the others actually mocked him.

→ But even if we look past the times when he was less of a success, how could Paul ever really know if he had been successful enough for this to be his source of certainty? So “success” can’t be the answer to certainty either.

## **III. Possible answer #3: the Lord’s past care/provision.**

✘ In verse 17 of our text, we find another potential cause for Paul’s certainty. As Paul looked back at his life and the difficult times he experienced, he says that he could see how Jesus “stood by” him time and again, even referring to a very recent event when the Lord “rescued” him, Paul says, “from the lion’s mouth” – likely referring to how he was spared from execution or some other great peril. So, perhaps this is why Paul was so sure.

→ It’s quite common for people to find reassurance in life this way, making it through difficult times. We all remember times in the past when God stood by us and faithfully cared for and provided for us as only He could do.

✘ But can memories like these really make Paul certain that he will receive the crown of righteousness on the Last Day, as he refers to it in verse eight?

→ These memories could have certainly been a part of Paul’s reason for being so sure. Without a doubt they would bring comfort in his time of suffering in prison. But it seems like the certainty Paul is talking about here stretches far beyond just the assurance of God’s promise to care for us in this earthly life.

→ I think we’re beginning to get close, but we’re not quite there.

## **IV. Possible answer #4: certainty based on his faith.**

✘ At first glance verses 7-8 seem to provide a possible answer as to the source of Paul’s certainty. It looks like he is lifting up his own faith as the answer. Paul says, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth (meaning “in the future) there is laid

up for me the crown of righteousness". Is that what it sounds like? Is Paul lifting up his own faith as the reason for why he is sure to receive the crown of righteousness?

→ So many people, even life-long Lutheran Christians, try to find certainty by trusting upon their own faith. They often say things like "Don't worry, my faith is strong" and "I'm a person of faith, so I'm all set". But friends, far more important than you or me hanging on to some kind of generic "faith", is whether or not our faith is based upon the right person. Too often our faith is "in" our own faith – that is, we put our trust in our own ability to believe. You see, if my certainty is based upon "me" believing in some generic "god" that I have defined by my own unique selection of characteristics – what makes me happy or what allows me to do whatever I want to do – than my faith is doomed to failure from the get go.

✘ The ultimate problem with this kind of certainty is that it is never complete. What if my faith wavers or changes from allowing this behavior, or that action that I used to believe was wrong? What if my faith is no longer popular, or brings persecution like Paul's faith brought? How do we know if we have believed enough, or believed correctly?

→ No, Paul's own faith – his own ability to believe and keep the faith – was not his source of certainty. But we are getting very close to the right answer.

## V. Answer #5: certainty based on Christ crucified.

✘ Paul tells us very clearly, that this is not "his" faith, created and designed by "his" own power and making, but instead he says, "I have kept the faith" (v.7). You see, this is a faith well-established outside of himself – it is "the faith"; the one and only true faith.

→ To understand how Paul could be so sure and to understand the role of the faith in his certainty, we need to go back to something at the beginning of his Second Letter to Timothy. In chapter 1:12 Paul says, "I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me".

→ The source of Paul's certainty doesn't come from Paul, but from the one in whom he believes. Jesus Christ is the object of Paul's faith and therefore the source of his certainty. Or, as Paul put it in Galatians 6:14, "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ".

→ Paul's certainty; his assurance is in Christ and Christ alone; in the fact – and yes I said "the fact" that he knew Christ had been crucified for him and for the entire world. And because of that fact, Paul was sure that Jesus would deliver him from evil and award him the crown of righteousness; Christ's righteousness placed upon Paul's head in eternity.

✘ In fact, Christ crucified is what gives meaning and importance to all of the other possible answers that we considered earlier.

→ 1) Paul's conversion experience only has meaning and provides certainty because Paul was baptized into Christ crucified.

→ 2) Paul's apostolic work only mattered because it was done in the name of Christ crucified, and nothing done in Jesus' name – whether a success or a failure by worldly standards – is done in vain. Paul knew without doubt that in Christ crucified all his sins and failures were forgiven.

→ 3) Paul's memories of how the Lord stood by him in times of suffering only mattered because Christ's death on the cross gives all of God's other works of care and comfort meaning and purpose – to lead us to the Lord's "rescue...from every evil deed and [to] bring [us] safely into His heavenly kingdom" (v. 18).

→ 4) And Paul's faith matters because it is the faith that clings only to Christ and Christ's free gift of righteousness flowing with His blood from the cross.

## Conclusion

- ⌘ So, how could Paul be so sure? Because he knew Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And that my friends, is the Good News for you and me, too. Jesus was not crucified only for Paul. He was crucified for the entire world; for every human being who has ever lived. Jesus was crucified for you! And that means that Christ crucified is your certainty in life and in death!
  - You and I, we all face uncertainty, both in life and in death, just like Paul. Yet in life and in death there is one fact that is always certain: that Jesus was crucified for your sins; that Jesus was raised for your justification; that in Jesus, you have eternal life!
- ⌘ Knowing this, you can be sure, just as Paul was, 1) that Jesus will deliver you from every evil deed; 2) that He will bring you safely into His heavenly kingdom; 3) and that Jesus will place upon your head the crown of righteousness in the resurrection on the Last Day. Yes, you can be sure of it. In Jesus' name! Amen.