



A CHURCH FORMED: A RACE TO RUN

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SERIES: EPIC

In the West, we have witnessed the decline of the so-called “meta-narrative.” The God whom the Scriptures hail has more or less been removed from the story of Western Civilization. Oh, our world acknowledges a time when a concept of God held prominence, but most people think we’ve moved beyond all that.

Without a Creator and Redeemer, however, our world is hard-pressed to find any transcendent purpose for human life. The purposeless life is too grim for many people to bear, but some courageous souls live with the implications of a world without God. Writer T.C. Boyle, answering a question put to him about his bleak worldview, said:

My dear fellow, we all put our heads down, don't we? In previous generations, there was purpose; you had to die, but there was God, and literature and culture would go on. Now, of course, there is no God, and our species is imminently doomed, so there is no purpose. We get up, raise families, have bank accounts, fix our teeth and everything else. But really, there is utterly no purpose except to be alive.¹

In *EPIC*, we have taken in, from Genesis to the letters of the New Testament so far, the astonishing story of God and the world. What does it mean for us to live in light of this story? Does the story give us a purpose? If so, what is it? For answers to these questions, we turn to the most significant figure of the New Testament outside of Jesus himself, the apostle Paul, and to his last letter, 2 Timothy.

Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, his protégé, from prison in Rome. He believed that he would soon be executed because of his beliefs and actions in behalf of the gospel. He therefore interlaces his instructions to Timothy with reflections on his own life. Specifically, within 2 Timothy, we turn to those personal reflections. Last words, as they say, are lasting words. These are the last words we have from the apostle, who gives us a purpose that motivates us, a presence that empowers us, and a vision that sustains us.

A purpose that motivates

2 Timothy 1:11:

¹¹And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.

The Lord Jesus Christ “appointed” Paul, giving him a great purpose: to further the gospel—that is, the good news concerning the victory of God over evil, which he accomplished in the death and resurrection of his Son. Behind the gospel announcement (“Jesus is Lord”) is a story. How can it be that Jesus is Lord? To answer that question, you have to tell a story, however briefly: the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel story is itself the climax of a larger story—the story of the world and, more particularly, the story of one nation within the world, Israel, which God partnered with to address the evil in the world. On the one hand, Israel failed: called to be a light to the world, she turned away from the Lord and turned inward. On the other hand, Israel succeeded: she gave birth to the Messiah. In order to further the gospel, Paul first had to become familiar with the story. As a Jew—a learned Pharisee, no less—he knew the story of Israel, but as an opponent of the gospel, he had to learn the story of Jesus, especially the story of how Jesus fulfilled the story of Israel.

The risen Lord Jesus appeared to Paul and appointed him in three ways: as a herald, as an apostle, and as a teacher. A herald, or preacher, would proclaim good news to waiting people, especially good news of victory at war (Isaiah 40:9, 52:7). As a herald of the gospel, Paul proclaimed the good news of God’s victory over Satan, sin, and death. As an apostle, Paul was personally commissioned and sent by the risen Lord Jesus to lead the early church. As a teacher, he communicated important truths regarding faith and conduct to the first churches.

Paul, knowing the story and being commissioned for the sake of the story, was consumed both by the story and by his purpose to advance it. He oriented his life around a compelling purpose: to advance the gospel of God.

Bringing God’s healing love to the world

Just as the story came to Paul, it comes to us. Since September of last year, we as a church have torn into what we have called *EPIC: The Astonishing Story of God and the World*, which climaxes, as we have seen, in the death, resurrection, and enthronement of Jesus Christ as Lord of the world. We know more of the story, but there’s always more to know, and different ways of knowing, so that we might draw closer to the God of the story. Therefore, we must continue immersing ourselves in, and praying

through, the Scriptures.

If we know the story, and if we go deeper into the story and draw closer to God, what do we do with such knowledge, with such intimacy? Might Jesus approach us, somewhere along the way to appoint us, as he appointed Paul? Might he also give us a purpose? None of us, of course, will have Paul's specific appointment, but is not our purpose, generally, the same as his: to advance the gospel?

Yes, whatever our appointment—and Jesus appoints all his followers, whether we know it or not—it has something to do with advancing the gospel, something to do with sharing God's healing love, which signals the coming of the new world and actually contributes to it as God honors our labor in his behalf by taking what we do and enhancing it (1 Corinthians 15:58). The gospel, like yeast in a loaf, permeates all of life so that whatever we do in word or deed, from rearing children to laying bricks to cleaning dishes to praying for the world to speaking up for justice, we do "in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). (See my message "Seeds of Significance": www.pbc.org/messages/seeds-of-significance.)

If you see yourself as an instrument in God's purpose to heal the world and create a new world, you can immediately jettison all feelings of insignificance. We can admire those such as T.C. Boyle for having the courage to embrace the implications of unbelief, but we cannot agree with their unbelief. Sure, we get up, raise families, have bank accounts, and even fix our teeth, for that matter, but not without purpose. In fact, we do all these things and are more motivated by the greatest purpose imaginable: to bring God's healing love to the world and to contribute to the creation of a new world.

Yes, the author of the story has written a part for you, and only you can play it. True, you don't have Paul's appointment, but he didn't get your appointment, either. Even if he were alive today, he couldn't do what you can do.

A woman named Janet Gore, director of the Journey's End Ministries food pantry in Newcomerstown, Ohio, speaks as if the Lord has written a part for her. Political pundit Joe Klein, during an election year tour of Ohio, a so-called battleground state, stumbled upon the food pantry, which is funded by thirty local churches, and found the place humming with elderly volunteers. Klein spent a morning visiting with needy people who came to the pantry for help and discovered that most of them were receiving some form of government assistance. "But they had found something at Journey's End that they couldn't find at government agencies: a loving community that wasn't judgmental," Klein wrote in a Time magazine column. Some of the recipients even volunteered their spare time.

Klein talked with Gore about her political views but found that they were not nearly important to her as "the daily joys she felt in the food pantry." Gore told him, "You can just feel how happy we are, how blessed to do this work. Can't you?" Klein answered, "Yes, I could." Gore sounds like a woman with a gospel-motivated purpose that caused a secular pundit to stand up and take notice.²

First, a purpose—bringing God's healing love to the world—motivates us. Second, a presence empowers us.

A presence that empowers

2 Timothy 1:12:

¹²That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.

2 Timothy 1:15:

¹⁵You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes.

2 Timothy 2:8b-10:

^{8b}This is my gospel, ⁹for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. ¹⁰Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

2 Timothy 3:10-11:

¹⁰You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.

2 Timothy 4:6:

⁶For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near.

2 Timothy 4:9-10:

⁹Do your best to come to me quickly, ¹⁰for Demas, because he loved this world, has

deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia.

2 Timothy 4:16-18:

¹⁶At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. ¹⁷But 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. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸The 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. Amen.

Paul's purpose, to advance the gospel as a herald, an apostle, and a teacher, leads him into suffering: persecution from enemies of the gospel, resulting in imprisonment, and desertion by friends who feared being associated with a prisoner. Friends deserted Paul, but Paul didn't desert the gospel.

For him, the gospel, and his purpose to advance it, was worth whatever he had to suffer for it. He was willing to suffer not only "for the sake of the elect"—that is, the people of God—but also for those who had not yet come to faith, "so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it." He suffered both for the sake of God and for the sake of others, comparing his life to a sacrificial "drink offering." Therefore, his suffering in general and his imprisonment in particular caused him no shame, even up to what he expects to be the time of his "departure," that is, his execution. He doesn't retreat from his commitment to the gospel, "because I know whom I have believed." Paul knows God, and knowing God, he's willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel of God. For Paul, the gospel is worth it.

Paul didn't suffer and wither. He suffered and, with the Lord's help, he endured. Paul tells Timothy, who knows the nature of the persecutions that Paul endured, that "the Lord rescued me from all of them" and that he was "delivered from the lion's mouth"—that is, the clutches of Rome. Although no one supported Paul when he faced his Roman accusers, "the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength." The Lord has strengthened him—such language, for Paul, implies the work of the Holy Spirit—and rescued him from death, and although he expects the Lord to continue strengthening him, he doesn't expect to escape death for much longer. However, the strength that the Lord has given Paul to endure anticipates a final rescue: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom." His enemies have no real power over him, because Paul expects the Lord to vindicate him beyond the grave, by resurrecting him from the dead.

Paul suffers, but he endures, and though he expects his suffering to result in death, his endurance anticipates his resurrection. In other words, he not only preaches the gospel story, he also embodies the story. Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:10-11: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." Paul's suffering mirrors the suffering of the Messiah ("the death of Jesus"), and his endurance mirrors the resurrection of the Messiah ("the life of Jesus").

In 2 Timothy 4:16-18, Paul echoes Psalm 22, a lament of David that features suffering and vindication. We find Psalm 22 both on the mouth of Jesus as he hangs from the cross ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") and in the words of the gospel writers as they narrate the crucifixion. In echoing Psalm 22, and in reflecting on his sufferings, endurance, and expected vindication, Paul is echoing the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah. Paul not only knows the story, he also lives the story.

The Holy Spirit gives us what we need

The purpose that the story gives us, to advance the gospel by bringing God's healing love to the world, may lead us, as it led Paul, into suffering: persecution, ridicule, ostracization, and spiritual attack. But ask yourself: Don't you want to believe in something so much that it calls forth the best in you? And aren't you willing to—and don't you even want to—suffer for some worthy cause? If you, like Paul, know God and appreciate not only that he has saved you but also appointed you to bring his healing love to people who desperately need it, wouldn't you say that the gospel is a worthy cause?

The good thing about suffering for God is that we're suffering for someone who is able to help us when we're suffering. When we suffer for the gospel, we might be tempted to pull back no matter how great the cause. When we suffer, though, God is present with us through his Holy Spirit, loving us and strengthening us. When we're weak, he is strong. We suffer, yes, but we also endure by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives us what we need when we need it: encouragement, a friend, a change in circumstances, the strength of ten men—deliverance from the lion's mouth. The Holy Spirit empowers us to endure.

Inasmuch as the Spirit's deliverance of us anticipates our final deliverance from death, we, like Paul, embody the gospel story: our suffering and endurance are connected to the death and resurrection of the Messiah. We know the story, we tell the story, and we live the story.

Because the suffering that I have endured has been relatively minor, I have benefited from visiting countries where followers of Jesus are exposed to more overt persecution. Many believers in India have shared with

me harrowing stories of persecution. Some of them, with huge smiles on their faces, have shared stories like this: “I was preaching the gospel. They beat me up, threw me in a ditch, and left me for dead. But God saved me.” Some of them are happy to roll up their sleeves or pant legs or even pull up their shirts to show you the scars from their beatings. They suffered and they endured, embodying the gospel story. Most of us in the West haven’t suffered like that for following Jesus. I certainly haven’t. Still, each of us suffers in some way at times, if only emotionally.

Some years ago, I was especially discouraged, questioning my effectiveness as a pastor. As a result, I drew up a chair at a local coffee house and journaled about my feelings. Finally, these words came from my pen: “it hurts so much.” I was about to start my next sentence when a woman came up to my table and introduced herself as a member of PBC, my church. She shook my hand, looked me in the eye and said, “I appreciate your ministry so much.” Her eyes were full of tenderness, and she emphasized the words “so much.” Then, like an angel, she left as quickly as she came.

I looked down at the last sentence I had written. My last words and my visitor’s last words were identical. If I wrote that feeling ineffective as a pastor hurt “so much,” my visitor used the words “so much” to affirm my effectiveness as a pastor. She matched my words of pain with words of appreciation.

Is it too much to suppose that the Holy Spirit sent the woman my way with just the right words at just the right time? I don’t think so. I drew strength from my visitor’s words. Right there in the coffee house, I experienced a mini death and resurrection. I suffered, but I endured: the Lord rescued me.

First, a purpose—advancing the gospel—motivates us. Second, the Holy Spirit empowers us. Finally, a vision sustains us.

A vision that sustains

2 Timothy 4:7-8:

⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, 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.

In these verses, Paul employs one of his favorite metaphors: that of an athletic contest. (The word translated “fight” would be better translated “contest”.) Literally, Paul says, “I have contested the good contest”—not that he has competed in a good way, though he certainly has, but that

he has competed in a contest that is good. The “contest,” so to speak, concerns advancing the gospel by preaching and embodying the story. The specific contest Paul evokes is that of a race—a race that he has all but finished, now that his “departure” is near.

In running the race, Paul has “kept the faith,” which, in line with the athletic metaphor, implies playing by the rules. But how is Paul applying the image to his life? The word translated “faith” can either mean something that is believed or faithfulness in the context of what is believed. Probably, Paul means both things. He has persevered in the faith of the gospel and he has been faithful to preach and embody the gospel. He has neither broken faith nor proved unfaithful. He hasn’t taken shortcuts; he’s run according to the rules.

The winner of the kind of race Paul evokes would be awarded a victor’s wreath or crown, possibly by the emperor himself. Paul expects no victor’s wreath from Caesar, the Roman emperor, or from any of his magistrates. In fact, he expects Rome to reward him for his faith and faithfulness by sending him to his death. No matter: Paul cares nothing for Caesar’s evaluation; he only cares for the evaluation of the Lord Jesus, “the righteous Judge,” who will reward him not with a perishable wreath at the end of a contrived contest but with the imperishable “crown of righteousness” on “that day,” the day of the Lord, when Jesus Christ comes to consummate his reign. In the “race” that matters, Paul is the winner, first in view of his faith, which marks him out in the present as one of God’s people, and second in view of his faithfulness, which the Lord will honor in an eternal way when he appears. All those who are marked out in the present as righteous, as belonging to God, in view of faith in his Son, will receive victor’s crowns, after which they will reign with Christ in the new world.

Paul does not see himself as racing against anyone, although opponents both seen and unseen are pressuring him to drop out or take short cuts, inasmuch as “all who have longed for his appearing” will receive crowns of righteousness. He sees himself as running with others, not against them. He hasn’t tried to defeat anyone; he’s only tried to persevere according to the rules, so to speak.

The crown of righteousness

This competitive instinct that we all seem to have is quite fascinating. It runs deep, doesn’t it? It runs so deep, in fact, that many of us live or die with the victories or defeats of a favorite team, the members of which we don’t even know. A fan of the University of California football team describes his feelings when his beloved Bears had a chance to become the number one team in the nation in 2007 but faltered when a last-second rally in a game against Oregon State fell short:

In those ten seconds, my hormone system blew up. My brain blew up. Neurons fired away like gangbusters in the brain centers for empathy, action, language, pride, identity, self, reward, relationships, love, addiction, pain, and happiness.³

A lot took place in those ten seconds! It fascinates me that after all these years, I still care what the San Francisco Giants do.

My high school basketball coach lectured us, “Boys, I want competitors. If you’re in a spitting contest, you should spit and spit and spit until you’ve got no spit left.” None of us enjoys losing. Although some of us can muster sympathy for an opponent we’ve defeated, few of us would trade places with the loser. It seems as if we were born to compete.

Perhaps, more than anything, we were born to compete in the race that Paul evokes. It’s easy to get sidetracked, isn’t it, to run in the wrong race, to compete for perishable wreaths, and even to find ourselves, say, caring more for a favorite team than the progress of the gospel. What if we were to channel our competitive instincts into the gospel race? What if we were to see everything we do, from scrubbing the floors to leading a corporation to feeding the poor to evangelizing a neighbor, as wrapped up in the God’s purposes to bring his healing love to the world? Even if we channel our competitive feelings in such a way, it’s easy to lose heart. It’s not an easy race, and the opposition is ruthless. We need a vision to sustain us. Here it is:

At the end of the race, you kneel before the Lord, the righteous Judge. You look up, full in his face. What do you see? Does he turn away? Does he shake his head? Does he furrow his brow? No. He beams with pride! He knows the difficulty of the race. After all, he ran it before you! He knows your appointment was a challenging one. After all, he gave it to you! He knows your limitations—a bum knee, a faulty heart, whatever. After all, he made you! He also knows this: you didn’t drop out. You kept pushing ahead, even stumbling at times, all the way to the finish line. You look up, full in his face, and he beams with pride. Then he opens his mouth. Listen, he speaks, and he speaks to you: “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness! Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” Now he bends down. Look, he bends down! He places on your head a crown. He who bore the crown of thorns for you places the crown of righteousness on your head!

They will run and not grow weary

We have a purpose that motivates us: bringing God’s healing love to the world. We have a presence that empowers us: the Holy Spirit. We have an image that sustains us: Jesus placing the crown of righteousness on our heads.

Isaiah 40:30-31:

**³⁰Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;**

**³¹but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.**

**They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.**

NOTES:

¹T.C. Boyle, interviewed by Andrew Goldman, “Doomsday Preacher” (*The New York Times*, Sunday Magazine, October 21, 2012), MM14.

²Joe Klein, “Where Checks Alone Can’t Help” (*Time*, June 25, 2012), 32-33.

³Eric Simons, *The Secret Lives of Sports Fans* (New York: Overlook, 2013).