

+ Revelation 2:10 + Faithful to the End +
+ Christian Victory Service of Donald Barg + 29 July 2009 +

Dear Family and Friends of Don Barg, especially you dear Evelyn, Doug, and Gale,

If I asked you to come up with one word to describe Don, what word would come to mind? Gruff? Tough? Generous? Loving? Precise? Organized? Supervisor? Dad? Grandpa? How about the word “faithful”? It’s a fitting word. Seventy years ago this past April, the Lord in his wisdom used Don’s pastor back at Gethsemane in Milwaukee to choose our text as Don’s confirmation verse. That verse could really be described as the motto for his life. When you look at the seventy years that followed, you can see how important being “faithful” to the Lord and his Word was in Don’s life even to the end. It was important because to the end the Lord remained faithful to his servant and at the end the Lord remained faithful to his promise. Our Savior through his apostle John provides the words of our text from Revelation 2, **“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”**

Being faithful is more than just lip service. When the Lord had John write the words of our text, the apostle wasn’t sitting back in an easy chair enjoying the comforts of life. No, he was in exile after nearly seventy years of service to his Lord. John was in exile because he remained faithful to the only true God—his Savior Jesus Christ. Surely it was lonely being under guard on the island of Patmos out in the Mediterranean. The other eleven apostles who had followed Jesus with him were gone. Many other fellow believers had also been imprisoned or lost their lives. They had remained faithful to their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ even to the point of death.

John was weary after his long years of service, but as the Lord had him write these words to the persecuted believers in the Asian city of Smyrna surely John found encouragement too. He found renewed hope to remain faithful to the end because of the promised reward that lay at the end.

...But it wasn’t his own faithfulness, his own efforts, his own service to the Lord that gave him hope and comfort and encouragement. In fact, if that were the case, John might have had reason to fear. You see, humanity all the way back to our first parents has failed to be faithful to the one, true God. Since our first parents, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, every single human being has inherited their failure to remain faithful to the will of the holy God. Every single human being has then failed to live up to God’s holy standards. In fact, because of our natural faithlessness towards the holy God and our natural faithfulness to disobedience and sin, every single human being earns and deserves the curse of God’s holy Law—**“From dust you are and to dust you will return...The wages of sin is death...”** Death is the awful effect and consequence of sin, which corrupts every one of us.

In that light, then, you might look at this command to **“Be faithful, even to the point of death...”** and wonder how it is even possible. How can I be sure that I will receive the victor’s crown of life in heaven if I’m going to fail? How can I be sure that my husband, my dad, my grandpa now wears that victor’s crown of life in the glories of heaven if he, too, was a sinner who suffered death? Take a closer look at the verse and the answer is right in front of you. It’s a little word that is so easily missed, but makes all the difference for your life as it did for Don. It’s the little word **“I”**. In that one-letter word, you have the answer to your sin, your failures, to Don’s sin and his failures, to death. Who is it that makes this command and promises to **“give you the crown of life”**? **“I will...”** “I, Jesus, **the First and the Last, who died and came to life again**, I will **“give you the crown of life.”**

The answer to your sin, the answer to your failure, the answer to death is Jesus, the One who rules over all of human history from beginning to end, the One who faithfully carried out every promise to his people. It was Jesus who faithfully fulfilled the promise to our first parents—to crush Satan’s power even at the expense of his own life. It was Jesus who faithfully fulfilled every promise of the Old Testament—to be born of a virgin in lowly Bethlehem, to live a life perfectly obeying every command of his Father’s holy will, to be rejected by men and forsaken by God, to suffer and die on a cross, to destroy the power of death with his glorious resurrection from the dead. It was Jesus who faithfully carried out his work here on earth not for his own sake, but to bring comfort and hope and peace and life to people like John and the Christians at Smyrna and Don and you and every other believer in Christ. It was Jesus who did all that to give power to his promise of forgiveness and of the victor’s crown of life in heaven.

It was Jesus, who faithfully gave power through his Word to the waters of Holy Baptism, so that when Don’s parents brought him to the font, Don became a member of God’s family as a forgiven child of God through those waters. It was Jesus, who faithfully grew and strengthened the faith his Holy Spirit had created in Don’s

heart through the study of the Word of God. It was Jesus, who kept Don faithful to his Lord in the years that followed through the Second World War and numerous job transfers and family moves all over the country. It was Jesus, who kept Don faithful to his Lord when the family finally settled down here and kept him faithful to the Word through those years up to the time when the Lord used him and you, Evelyn, among others to start a little Wisconsin Synod mission congregation right here. It was Jesus, who blessed the hard work needed to start this congregation and it was Jesus, who enabled and motivated Don to faithfully serve during those early years as a leader in this congregation, in our district, and in our synod. Above all, it was Jesus who remained faithful to Don, never leaving his side as the years and health problems increased until the Lord in his grace and mercy brought a peaceful end to Don's struggle in this life and brought him home to heaven.

The truth is, when you look back on Don's life, it becomes quite clear to see that the Lord always remained faithful to his servant, even in Don's toughest times, in his struggles with sin, and at the end as he faced death. There at the end, we see how the Lord remained faithful to his promise. ***"...And I will give you the crown of life."***

Surely those words encouraged the aged apostle John as he wrote them to his fellow believers in Smyrna. A reward of grace, not earned or deserved, but won by Christ, awaited him at life's end. In later chapters, John describes what that eternal victory in Christ will look like. ***"I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'... These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb...And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'"***

What a breathtaking picture of heaven! What a beautiful sight more glorious than the mountains of Colorado on a clear day or sunset on the lake! What more comforting words can we hear as we mourn the loss of our loved one in the Lord! Those words are comforting not because Don was such a great guy or lived such a perfect life, but because Jesus lived a perfect life for him and died the death he deserved, then conquered death when he abandoned his tomb on Easter morning. Those words are comforting because Jesus, your living Savior, did all that for you to be with him too. Those words are comforting because Jesus is and always will be faithful to his people and his promises to the end, as he later said, ***"He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son."***

On Saturday, our Lord Jesus, the First and the Last, who died and came to life again, brought home Don Barg, his faithful servant, and gave him the victor's crown of life won by Christ for him. Jesus made all things new. By God's grace through faith in your Savior Jesus, a time will come when you too will receive that same victor's crown of life from the loving, nail-pierced hands of your living Savior. May you serve him faithfully until the end. Amen.