

# I Have Kept the Faith

by John Piper

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*Keeping the faith means trusting in the integrity and power of Jesus Christ to do everything he says, and persevering in that trust despite the struggles and challenges of life.*

**Duration:** 35:35

**Scripture:** Matthew 10:22, Hebrews 3:5-6, Revelation 2:7, Revelation 2:10-11

**Topics:** "Faith"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the year 1980 and encourages the audience to assess it by the same standard of success that Paul used in his final letter to Timothy. The speaker emphasizes the importance of remembering the brevity of life and the nearness of death, as it brings wisdom and humility. They also highlight the need to trust in God and not rely on our own understanding. The sermon concludes with the reminder that finishing the race of faith, resisting opponents, and remaining steadfast in the gospel are essential to receiving the crown of righteousness.

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## Transcript

For me, the end of a year is like the end of my life. 1159, Wednesday night, will be like the moment of my death. The 365 days of 1980 are like a miniature lifetime, as I look back, and these final days here at the end are like those final hours in the hospital as the family gathers around in one of those rooms where they have a sofa and carpet just after the doctor has said the end is near.

And in these last hours of 1980, the whole thing passes before my eyes and the inevitable question arises, did I live it well? When, at 1201, on January 1, I enter into the presence of Christ, will I hear him say, well done, Piper, good and faithful servant? I feel very, very fortunate that 1980 ends this way for me, like the end of my life, and I pray that if that's not your experience at the end of a year, that perhaps just this morning you might share that perspective with me for a few minutes. And the reason I feel so fortunate that that's the way it ends for me is that it's a great advantage, it's a great advantage to have a trial run at your own dying. It's a great benefit to rehearse once a year for the final scene.

And the reason it's a great benefit is because for most of us, January 1 is going to find us alive and well, with a whole new beginning stretching out in front of us, very different from the day of our dying. And that's a good thing. The great thing about rehearsals is that they show you where your preparation has been faulty and how you can improve before the play actually begins.

But I suppose for some of you, at least I've run into lots of people like this, the thought of dying is so gloomy and so depressing, so fraught with grief and pain, that you do everything you can to keep it out of your minds, especially during a holiday season like this. But I think that's very, very unwise. I think you'd do yourself a great disservice if that's the way you think.

Because I've found that there is no more life-changing or revolutionizing thing than a periodic pondering of my own dying. How do you get a heart of wisdom so that you know how to live well in your life? The psalmist answers that question like this, Thou dost sweep men away, they are like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning. In the morning it flourishes and is renewed, and in the evening it fades and withers.

So teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom. Numbering your days simply means remembering that your life is very short and that death is very near. And great wisdom, great life-changing, revolutionizing wisdom comes from periodically pondering that fact.

And part of that life-changing wisdom is this, namely a humility and a yieldedness to the will of God. Here's the way James wrote to a very arrogant group of people in the churches of the dispersion about this matter. He said, Come now, you who say today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a while and get gain, whereas you do not know about tomorrow.

What is your life? For you are a mist that appears a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do such and such. As it is, you boast in your arrogance and all such boasting is evil.

If we run away from the thought of our dying, we will wind up being arrogant and presumptuous. We will think that we are the masters of our days, when in fact every moment and the end of this service is a gift from the free and sovereign will of God. If the Lord wills, we will live and do such and such.

But if we do not keep this out of our minds, but instead at least once a year, for me it has to be much more often than that. If we're willing to do this at least once a year, imagine our death, we will be humbled, we will be moved to greater yieldedness to the sovereign will of God, and we will be filled with a very practical wisdom for how to go about life day by day. So here we stand at the end of our lives now in 1980.

How shall we judge it as we look back? This is a Sunday probably for looking back and perhaps next Sunday for looking ahead. How shall we judge 1980? By what standard of success shall we assess it? I want us to use the same one that Paul did here in our text, 2nd Timothy chapter 4 verses 6 through 8. This is probably the last letter that Paul wrote. It has a ring of finality about it.

First of all, in chapter 4 verse 5, he gives Timothy an admonition, and you can hear the ring of finality there too. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry, and then to encourage and inspire Timothy, he tells Timothy what his own endurance has been like and where it's brought him. I'm already on the point of being sacrificed.

For me the time of departure has come. I fought the good fight. I finished the race.

I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me, not only to me but to everybody who has loved his appearing. The criterion of success for Paul as he looked back on his life was very simply whether he had kept the faith or not.

And that's what I want us to look at this morning. What it means to keep the faith. The true measure of our life in 1980 was whether or not we kept the faith.

And if we discover that we did not keep the faith, there's good news, I pray, for most of us, namely that 1981 is a whole new beginning. And if we are not satisfied that we kept the faith in 1980, maybe the play will just begin for us in 1981. So let's make sure we understand now what Paul means by keeping the faith here in 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse 7. There are three phrases in this verse that describe how he had lived his life.

I have fought the fight, the good fight. I have finished the race and I have kept the faith. Now I don't think that fighting the fight and finishing the race are different from keeping the faith.

I think that those two pictures of fighting and racing are simply ways of describing what's involved in keeping the faith. And here's the reason that I think that. Over in 1 Timothy chapter 6 verse 12, Paul gives this admonition to Timothy.

Fight the good fight of faith. Fight the good fight of faith. You see, he didn't add that little phrase in chapter 4, but I think it's implied.

Take hold on eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession. So when Paul uses the very same phrase over in chapter 4 verse 7 of 2 Timothy and then follows it by the phrase I have kept the faith, we have good reason to think that when he said I have fought the good fight, he means the same thing he did in 1 Timothy. Namely, I have fought the good fight of faith and therefore fighting the fight and keeping the faith are the same thing.

One using a metaphor of fighting and the other simply describing it as holding on to faith. The two pictures of fighting and racing illustrate what's involved in keeping the faith. But before we talk about that in more detail, I think we better step back a moment and ask what he means by faith itself, about the nature of faith.

Paul does not mean, as many people might mean today, faith in himself or faith in any mere man. Paul means faith in Jesus Christ. If you just move back up into chapter 3 verse 15, he said to Timothy, the scriptures are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Now, when you have faith in a person, in Christ Jesus, you take them at their word. You count on them to live up to what they've said. You trust their counsel.

You have confidence in their promises. So when Paul said I have kept the faith, he meant, I think, I have kept on taking Christ at his word. I have kept on counting on him to live up to what he said.

I have kept on trusting in his counsel. I have kept on having confidence in his promises. Faith in Christ Jesus, therefore, is most fully explained as faith in his word, faith in all that he said.

Now, of course, faith in Christ's word is going to include faith in the fact that when he died, he paid for the forgiveness of our sins. Because he said, with his words, the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many. And, of course, faith in his word is going to include faith in his resurrection, that it gives us a great hope.

Because he said with his word, I am the resurrection and the life. If any man believes in me, even though he die, yet shall he live. And, of course, faith in the word of Christ is going to include faith in his present power to work on our behalf.

Because he said with his word, my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. If we focus on any of those three things, his death, his resurrection, and his power, and we say you must believe or trust in those things in order to be saved, we'd be saying something true, but something incomplete.

Because when we trust in a person, we trust in his integrity and his power. And the integrity of Christ is infinite. And his power is infinite.

And, therefore, everything that he says, he will do. Nothing can keep him from it. And, therefore, trust in that person must mean trust in everything he said.

I think if we say, I am trusting Christ, that he will forgive my sins. But we say, or we act, as if many of the other things he promised are not true, we do not have saving faith. For example, seek the kingdom first, and all these things will be added to you.

Everything you need for life. If we live as if that is not true, we are saying to Jesus, you are untrustworthy, and I do not trust you, and we cannot be saved. Now, that's very different from the message that is often heard today in evangelical church, and I want to make sure you grasp it.

I believe that trust in Jesus Christ means just that. Trust in the integrity and the power of Jesus to do everything that he says. Let me use an analogy to see if this helps you get a hold of it.

Consider that you are an employee in a company, and that your boss, long about August, says, I'm going to give you all a bonus, \$250 at the end of the year. And then you all gather down in the coffee shop, and all the employees gather together and say, do you think he's really going to do that? Do you think he'll come through with that bonus at the end? And you say, yeah, I think he will. I believe him.

And you plan on it. And a few days later, he says, anybody who gets up a half an hour early, comes to work every day, a half an hour early for the rest of the year, I will make sure that at the end of the year, over and above that \$250, you will not regret it. Then you all gather down in the coffee shop, and you start talking about that.

Do you think he'll really do that? Do you think he could make it worth our while? And you say, no way, getting up a half an hour. He couldn't make it worth my while to get up a half an hour early every morning. The question is this, do you trust your boss? You do not trust your boss.

You do not trust your boss. The reason that you think he'll pay that \$250 at the end is because it doesn't cost you anything. And it's comfortable to believe.

And besides, it doesn't depend on his integrity probably, it's a good tax advantage perhaps. And are not many people in the church today in that very situation with Jesus Christ. I think that he will pay the bonus of eternal life at the end.

He promised that if I depend on him and believe that he will, he'll do it. But they don't trust him, that it might be worth their while to follow his counsel in many other areas. I do not believe you can be saved and

live like that.

It does not accord with the teachings of the New Testament. Now that we understand what faith is a little better, we can ask, what does it mean to keep the faith? There are two pictures used, the race and the fight. What do they illustrate? What's involved in keeping the faith? There are three things.

First, the first thing we see is that keeping the faith is hard. Boxers get hit in the face and they bleed and they get all swollen. Runners punish their bodies to the limit of tolerance.

To use these metaphors of boxing or fighting and running must mean that Paul considers keeping the faith tough, painful, involving stress, pain. Here's the way Jesus put it, the gate that leads to destruction is wide, the way is easy, and the people that enter thereby are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life.

And there are only a few people who find it. The way that leads to life or to the crown of glory or to the crown of righteousness, as Paul calls it, is like a super marathon in the Himalayas or like 15 rounds with a heavyweight boxer. It is hard.

But now, if you're sharp, you're probably saying to yourself, as I did when I hit this, how can that fit with Matthew 11, 28, where Jesus says, Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I'll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, because I'm meek and lowly in heart, and you'll find rest for your souls. Because my yoke is what? It's easy.

My burden is light. Well, is it easy? Or is it hard? Yoke up with Jesus is going to be easy. Or is it going to be hard? When I saw that several years ago, I just really was taken back.

How to work that out? Here's my suggestion. The answer is that the thing required by God for salvation is intrinsically easy. But the condition of the human heart, the contrary condition of the heart, makes it hard.

What could be easier than faith? What could be easier than to stop trying to work your way into God's favor and to just rest in the free grace of God? Nothing. It's easy. What could be easier than to just trust God for your security and happiness, instead of rising early and going to bed late, eating the bread of anxious toil? It's easy to be saved.

Easy, easy, easy, if you have a heart that's willing to believe. But we don't. We don't.

Until the Spirit of God blows all unbelief out of our hearts, there remains a tendency in every one of us to want to overcome the obstacles to our happiness by ourselves. We do not like to accept charity. It is humiliating to accept charity, even from God, perhaps especially from God.

We don't like to appear helpless, do we? One of the most common criticisms thrown up on a college campus to Christians when they witness is, Oh, you just need a crutch. And my response to that is always the same, right? All cripples need crutches. And to the degree that that tendency, to the degree that that tendency in my heart is strong, the tendency to rely on myself, the tendency to hate crutches, to that degree, faith in the Word of Christ will be hard and a battle and not easy.

The easiest thing in the world becomes impossible for the person who wants to get glory for himself by doing something hard. Give me something hard to do so I can show you how great I am. Which is harder, to make a fortune or to give it all away? Well, to make a fortune is harder.

All Jesus said to the rich young man was, give it all away. Follow me. Well, it could be easier, right? Spend an afternoon here, here, here.

It's all over. You're saved. Unless you love the prestige and the power and the security of your wealth so much that you don't and you can't.

You just can't bring yourself to trust Christ when he says, follow me and you will have treasure in heaven. So, when Paul says that keeping the faith is like a fight and a race, he reminds us that there is remaining in every one of us, I know it in me, enough of that old nature to make faith a struggle, a race, a fight. It's not always easy to trust the promises of Christ and give up our own self-sufficiency.

That old tendency to trust ourselves and to lean on our own understanding, as the Proverbs says, and to seek our own glory is very strong and makes faith hard. And so the first thing that's implied in the picture of fighting and racing is that keeping the faith is not easy for people who are yet imperfect and have that old nature rearing its head now and then and demanding that we depend on ourselves instead of God. Here's the second thing implied, especially in the image of the race, namely, that we must finish it.

We must endure to the end in order to gain the crown. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.

Now there's laid up for me a crown of righteousness. You can run 5 miles. You can run 10 miles.

You can run beautifully 20 miles. If you drop off the side and don't cross the finish line, you don't get the crown, do you? Matthew 10 verse 22, Jesus begins this teaching and then it runs through the whole New Testament. He said, he who endures to the end will be saved.

Then John picks it up and he says to the seven churches again and again and again in verses 2 and 3 of the Revelation, to him who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God. 2.10, be faithful unto death, be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. Verse 11, he who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.

Chapter 3 verse 5, he who conquers shall be clad in white garments and I will not blot his name out of the book of life. The writer to the Hebrews, probably more than any other author in the New Testament, is intent on hammering home that we must hold our first confession firm to the end or we will not be saved. Chapter 3 verse 13, exhort one another every day as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin for we have shared in Christ only if we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

Chapter 6 verse 11 and 12 in Hebrews, we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope unto the end, so that you may not be sluggish but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. And then finally Paul himself in this great passage from Proverbs chapter 1 verse 23, and you who once were estranged and hostile in mind doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless before him provided you remain in the faith, stable and firm, not shifting from the hope of the gospel. It's a plain teaching all through the New Testament.

And that's the image of the race. We must finish the race if we want to get the crown. Then the third thing implied in the images and final thing, especially in the image of the fight, is that there are opponents who would ruin us and defeat us and we must resist them.

We must fight back at them. Now the implication is clear from the last point that if we give up on this fight, if we just take the path of least resistance, if there is no struggle in our life, then we will be defeated and gain no crown of righteousness. And I am so concerned that there are believers, that is people who claim to believe, who don't sense any spiritual struggle in their life.

They do not battle against their own corrupt heart or against Satan. They just breathe as if there were no problem in the world at all spiritually. The Christian life is a fight and if you sense no struggle in your life to trust Christ more, then only one of two things can be true.

You are perfect, I don't think there will be any struggle in heaven, or you've surrendered to the enemy. Who are these enemies that we fight? There are two main enemies. But these two enemies manage to muster lots and lots of neutral forces in the world and distort them.

The two enemies are you and me, our own sinful, corrupt natures, what Paul called the flesh, and Satan is the second enemy. And these two try to pervert all God's good creation and make them enemies too, by causing us to love them and trust them more than we love and trust the promises of God. Concerning our great adversary the devil, Paul said this, we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers and against the world rulers of this present darkness, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places.

Therefore, take the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand, and having done all in that evil day, to stand. Satan and all his hosts have one main target, and that is our confidence in God. Because as 1 John says, this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.

So if Satan can have that one thing and destroy it, he has everything he needs and everything he wants, our faith. Concerning our other enemy, namely ourselves, the flesh, that old nature that would rather depend on itself than trust God, the word from Paul is, reckon it as dead. If it rears its ugly head, chop it off.

Romans 8.13 says, if by the spirit you slay the deeds of the body, then you will live. We have two great weapons against old self and old Satan, namely the word of God and the spirit of God. And these two always work hand in hand, don't they? The spirit always wields the word of God.

Ephesians 6.17 says, the sword of the spirit is the word of God. The spirit wields the word. So the fight of faith is the fight to use the word of God against Satan and against self.

Happy is the man who has a promise from God in his heart to counter every satanic suggestion that to stop trusting Christ would make life better. We have a tremendous armory in the word of God. Several weeks ago, Tom Steller and I had a remarkable encounter with demonic manifestation.

And God was very gracious to us and he did a great work to bring us through that with victory. But I came away from that experience with one dominant burden. Piper, you have got to know more of the word of God by heart.

You've got to. Satan is helpless before the word of God. Jesus himself only used the word of God in combating Satan there in the wilderness.

There is tremendous power for our faith in the word of God that can be spoken into a situation right out of the heart. And oh, how weak I am in that area and how much I want to know more. Therefore, the fight of

faith is like wielding the word of God against the deceits of ourselves and against the wiles of the devil.

So now here we are at the end of our lives in 1980. If 1980 were the whole of our lives, could we say with Paul, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. And my guess is that there are people in this room who give three different answers to that.

One group of people will have to say this, I didn't fight in 1980 to keep the faith. I didn't have any desire to keep the faith. Therefore, there wasn't any struggle at all in me.

The second group of people will probably say something like this, I had some desire to trust Christ and to rest in all of his promises and to follow his counsel, but I didn't fight a very good fight. Every time the conflict arose, I lost and was defeated. And then the third group of people will say, Praise God, it was a hard but a wonderful year.

The word of God came alive for me and helped me time and again to overcome temptation and to cleave to Christ. It wasn't always easy, but thanks be to God who gives us the victory in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Now, whichever one of those three groups you're in, the good news is that this, I pray for all of us here, is just a rehearsal.

And that in three days, all of life opens up again with 1981. And you can move through 1981 as a fighter who is victorious if you will declare yourself as one who renounces Satan and all his power, renounces self-reliance and all the greed for glory that there is in it, and who turns to Christ and trusts him from the heart for all his word. And I pray that you'll do that.

By the grace of God, may in these last days of 1980, you set yourself to fight the good fight, run the race, and keep the faith in 1981. Amen.

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