

Preparing for Your Departure

Sovereign Grace Churches Pastors Conference 2025

CJ Mahaney | 2 Timothy 4:6-8

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Would you please turn in your Bible to the second letter of Paul to Timothy, chapter 4. What we have just witnessed this afternoon is rare in the life of a denomination. We have witnessed a prayerfully informed, Spirit-led process carried out by humble men with a heart to serve, that is leading to a transition in leadership from one generation to the next. Not simply a change in leadership, but a transition that involves a unified, convictional transfer of the gospel from one generation of pastors and church leaders to another. I am deeply grateful to the Lord. I am alive and present to witness it. It is kind of the Lord to give me this gift. It is stupid of me to go in this direction again and remind myself of what just took place.

Transitions like this are not only gifts from the Lord that make us grateful for the past, but they also direct our gaze to the future this evening. And it seems appropriate at a moment like this to look at a text that does the same thing—a text that reminds us of God's faithfulness in the past and a text that points our eyes to His faithfulness in the future. It's really hard to imagine a text that does this quite like the ending of Paul's second letter to Timothy, particularly chapter four, verses 6 through 8. Though our attention this evening will be devoted to verses 6 through 8, I will begin reading this evening in verse 1.

2 Timothy 4:1 “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up 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 loved His appearing.”

As an expression of their fine leadership of us and care for us, Mark, Jeff, and Jon have asked me to intentionally preach on this passage following this transition announcement and all it represents in our now more than 40-year journey together for the sake of the gospel. So let's consider this evening why this passage about a uniquely important transition in salvation history is so relevant to us at this particular time.

In this passage, the apostle Paul models for us what it looks like to finish strong and die well as he transfers the gospel to the next generation. So, in this brief passage, we discover Paul's dying

perspective of the present (verse 6), his dying perspective of the past (verse 7), and his dying perspective of the future (verse 8).

Now, I understand that the topic of death is quite the quick pivot from the joyous moment that we just experienced together. However, for the Christian, the biblical perspective of death should deepen, not dampen, our joy this evening, because our death should inform the way we live.

In his fine book titled *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End*, author David Gibson effectively makes this point when he writes:

“Death is an evangelist. He looks us in the eye and asks us to look him right back with a steady gaze and allow him to do his work in death as a preacher with a very simple message. Death has an invitation for us. He wants to teach us that the day of our coming death can be a friend to us in advance. The very limitation that death introduces into our life can instruct us about life. Think of it as death's helping hand. Instead of being superficial, death invites you to be a person of depth. It's an invitation to be a person who realizes a good life means preparing to die a good death.”

In 2 Timothy chapter four, death makes eye contact with each of us. Our impulse is to avoid making eye contact in response. But instead of looking away this evening, let's make eye contact with death and let's receive this invitation to be a person who realizes a good life—a good life as defined and described in Scripture—a good life means preparing to die a good death, just like the apostle Paul.

My outline is a simple one. First, a fixed departure (verse six). Second, a finished race (verse seven). Finally, a future crown (verse eight).

We begin with A Fixed Departure (verse 6): Paul's Dying Perspective Of the Present.

This is an intensely personal and sobering text, but the content of this text and Paul's tone in this text is a triumphant one throughout. Paul informs Timothy, his son in the faith whom he deeply loves, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come." These words must have been so emotionally difficult for Timothy to read.

You remember this morning, as Jeff made reference and read from Second Timothy chapter 1, verse 4, where Paul remembers Timothy's tears—Timothy's tears when they had previously parted from each other. If being separated from Paul for a brief time left Timothy in tears, how much more would news of Paul's impending death affect him?

But Paul is not merely writing to inform Timothy of his impending death. No, he's writing to serve Timothy. He's writing to prepare Timothy for a future that Paul won't see. Paul hasn't taken his eye off Timothy in verses 6 through 8. Paul's impending death is actually the reason for his charge in verses 1 through 5, as indicated by the opening word "for" in verse 6. In verse 5, Paul writes, "As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come." So as for you, fulfill your ministry, because as for me, the time of my

departure has come. Verse 6 is the why behind the sobering, forceful charge in verses 1 through 5.

Actually, Paul's impending death informs the content and urgency of this entire letter. Paul's impending death will require Timothy to step into a new role without the apostle at his side. And notice that Paul's description of his death is instructive for Timothy, and it's instructive for each of us as well. Paul likens his imminent death and the remaining days of his life to a drink offering being poured out. This is a picture drawn from the libations poured out on a sacrifice to the Lord, referenced in Numbers chapter 15. The final drops of Paul's sacrificial life are being poured out for the sake of the gospel as an offering to God Himself.

Notice that Paul describes his death as a departure. It's a word used to describe the untying of a boat that is about to set sail for another shore. For the Christian, death is not a finality. No, death is a departure from the land of the dying to the land of the living. This imagery of death as a departure is full of hope. Ken Hughes confirms this in his commentary where he writes, "The word 'departure' radiates sweet, triumphant continuance."

C.S. Lewis had this right in *The Last Battle*, where it is explained to the deceased children that they were, quote, "beginning chapter one of the great story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Paul views his impending death as a departure, and it doesn't appear to be a trace of fear in Paul as death draws near to him. By the way, this should come as no surprise, because remember, this is the man who previously wrote to the Philippians, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." Paul views his remaining life and his imminent martyr's death as a sacrifice for others, for the sake of the gospel and the offering. He views his impending death as an act of worship to God.

These few words—this is just a profound way to view one's life and one's death. This is a man who models how to die well for Timothy. He models how to die well for each of us this evening as well.

Second, A Finished Race (verse 7): Paul's Dying Perspective of the Past

Paul not only dies well, he finishes strong. After informing Timothy of his impending departure, Paul then serves Timothy by reflecting on his past life and ministry in verse 7. Paul uses athletic metaphors that are common in his letters—and I love Paul for this—to describe his life, culminating in verse 8 with the awarding of the victor's wreath by the Lord Himself.

In verse 7, this is the model for ministry that Paul impresses upon Timothy so that he might faithfully fulfill his ministry by the grace of God: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

My friends, this is a description of pastoral ministry. I mean, it's really what we signed up for. By the way, there's nothing romantic about this description of pastoral ministry. Pastoral ministry is not complicated, but it sure is demanding. The work of every pastor is pictured in this verse:

fighting a fight, running a race—and that would be a marathon, not a sprint—and guarding a treasure. This is going to require a lifetime of service, going to require a lifetime of endurance, and courage in the face of opposition, and heartbreak, and suffering.

But these are the categories, these are the priorities that are to inform Timothy's ministry. My fellow pastors, these are the categories and priorities that matter the most in fulfilling our ministry as well. I like how John Kitchen applies this verse in his commentary where he writes: "Do you see what God has called you to—called you to clearly enough to identify the arena of the faith you must fight in today? (Notice that word "today." I like that.) The course you must run today, the threats from which you must keep the faith today."

Well, there's just wonderful application in this single verse. Where are you being called to fight your sin today? What is the circumstantial course of either adversity or prosperity or some degree and combination of both in pastoral ministry that you must run today? What are the threats to the gospel in your church today?

By the way, let's put these applicatory questions in form by verse 8 into play. Put them into play during meals at this conference and put them into play as you interact with each other as a pastoral team when you return home. Let's care for each other by asking these kinds of theologically informed questions when we are together, because Paul models for us what it looks like to finish strong.

Aging pastors, Paul's example of finishing strong is the legacy that you and I—definitely by the grace of God—want to leave behind. To an aging pastor, each aging pastor here should look up from this verse and ask ourselves, "How can we align our lives with these priorities so I can say these very words when it's my time to enter hospice care?" Paul is a compelling, canonized example of finishing strong and dying well.

I think these verses are increasingly relevant to us in Sovereign Grace, given the number of aging pastors in Sovereign Grace. As I was preparing this message from this particular passage, I realized how much this chapter has been my companion in different seasons of my ministry life. As a younger man, I was very much preoccupied with the charge Paul issues in chapter four, verses 1 through 5. As I age and experience the hardship and heartbreaks of pastoral ministry, along with its unique joys described in verses 9 through 18, those verses captured my attention and served my soul. But in recent years, my attention has been drawn to verses 6 through 8.

Have you noticed—I'm sure you have—that as you age, verses you previously read but overlooked, you now understand and appreciate? Obviously, the Bible doesn't change, but you do. So does what you perceive by the illuminating work of the Spirit. All was there all along, hidden in plain sight, but the passage of time, the experience of aging, and the experience of suffering—it informs and it deepens our understanding and appreciation of a particular passage we previously read but didn't notice.

In the process of preparing this message, I retrieved my first official Bible. It is always a humbling experience for me to read through that Bible, to read comments that I made in the margin of verses, to read the individuals I was quoting at the time. But as I retrieved it, I

immediately thought, "What did you write as a young man in your early 20s in Second Timothy 4?" So I opened, and I was not surprised. I opened to that chapter. Verses 1 through 5 were crowded and filled with comment. Verses 6 through 8 and verses 9 through 18 certainly had comments made in response to those that I realized, "Yeah, there's a man in my early 20s." I read chapter four, verses 6 through 8, but I didn't perceive them. And I certainly wasn't paying attention.

The charge in chapter four, verses 1 through 5—that hasn't changed. The hardships and heartbreaks and joys in pastoral ministry continue, obviously. But for me, now at 72 years old, the time of my departure comes into view and must not be ignored. This is increasingly true for many pastors in Sovereign Grace.

When I turned 70, on my birthday, I told Carolyn that according to Moses, I was now on the clock. In Psalm 90, a Psalm authored by Moses, he writes, "The years of our life are 70, or even by reason of strength, 80; they are soon gone, and we fly away. So teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom." Well, my dear wife took this verse that I quoted to heart. Before our 10-day trip celebrating our 50th anniversary this past May, Carolyn asked, since I was, as she said, now on the clock, if we could plan our remaining years together during this particular trip. I said, "Sure." I mean, my thinking was, we're going away for 10 days—certainly over that time, we can find 15 minutes to plan the remaining years of our life together.

I can assure you I was not prepared for what took place at breakfast our first morning away on this particular trip. Toward the end of breakfast—and it had been a glorious breakfast, OK, if there's a single meal I love, it would be breakfast. Can you say bacon? I love scrambled eggs with bacon. I love a pancake with bacon and covered with syrup. I love fruit with bacon. I just straight up love bacon. The hotel we were staying at had just an insane buffet, just insane. I've never actually—don't think I've experienced one quite like it in my entire life. They also had a whole section, a massive section, with just baked goods, fresh baked goods. I had finished the main portion of my breakfast, but there were strategically placed on a new plate six small chocolate croissants. So that's how this breakfast was going to end—on that note, of devouring and enjoying all six of those.

Before I could take a bite of one of those, I noticed Carolyn adopted what I would just say is a familiar position. She leaned across from me, sitting in a booth, her arms were like this, and with a smile on her face, she said to me, "OK, let's get started planning the remaining years of our life." I was not prepared for this. I mean, my immediate response was, "Love, we are celebrating 50 years of a sizzling romance. I mean, we do not need to kick this off with planning the rest of our lives." Well, she reminded me, "You promised to do that." I tried to inform her—technically, yes, I did—but I said, "Love, if you were perceptive of my tone of voice, my tone of voice indicated it was a definite maybe. That's what my tone of voice indicated." And then I did—I tried to appeal. I said, "Love, there is no such thing as romantic planning. That doesn't exist. You can plan romance, which is what we are doing. But you can't flip that and have romantic planning about the remaining years. There's no book titled Romantic Planning. Planning, my love, is not romantic." I was just making every appeal, and at one point I just said, "Read the room, love. Read the room. See anybody planning?" Oh, my mind. I did—I tried to appeal. "Not even finished with breakfast yet. OK, I've got these six chocolate croissants."

But if you know my dear wife, she was just not going to be deterred. And then she said the following, and I quote: "CJ, you must think about your life differently. You don't have an open-ended life. In eight years, you will be 80. Your window to serve is closing. What are the most essential things you can do in your final season?" That's how we kicked off our 50th anniversary celebration. We kicked it off celebrating my demise.

Carolyn recommended that we basically organize the final season of our life together into four categories: future ministry, family, friends, and finances. So, I mean, the woman was absolutely prepared and it didn't surprise me not at all. On the other side of the trip, it produced this document that I hold in my hand. Yeah, this document. So tonight, if you are wondering if I can serve you in some way, if you don't appear on this document, the answer is no. If I make it, look me up when I'm 81. Until then, I'm booked, OK?

Here's what I can tell you from that day—and boy, time was spent every single day, every single day. Since that week, since that ten-day trip, since the finalizing of this particular document, not a week has gone by that I haven't benefited from this biblically informed plan—not a week, and most weeks, not even a single day.

So, if you are approaching 60, or if you are older than 60, let me just encourage you to prepare for your departure so that you can finish strong, so that you can die well by cultivating a theology of aging. You can get started, if you haven't already, cultivating a theology of aging by reading a book titled *Finishing Our Course with Joy: Guidance from God for Engaging with Our Aging* by J.I. Packer. He left this gift behind for us. Mr. Packer helpfully provides us with wisdom for a theologically informed engaging with our aging when he writes, quote:

“The Apostle's race image combines four notes. First, clear-headed goal orientation—you run to win. Second, purposeful planning—you think how you should run the race, pacing yourself, and preparing for the final burst. Third, resolute concentration—you put everything second to training for and then running and hopefully winning the race. And fourth, supreme effort—you run flat out, putting everything you have got into what you are doing.”

Oh, that is wise counsel. Wise counsel for the aging pastor; wise counsel for younger pastors as well. Listen, my friend, we not only have this evening Paul's ancient, canonized example of finishing strong and dying well, we also have the recent example of our own Ken Mellinger in this regard.

If you are a guest and Ken's name isn't familiar to you, he served on the Executive Committee since its inception in 2013. He also chaired the Executive Committee previously for the past five years, he served as a pastor in two different Sovereign Grace churches: Living Hope Church in Middletown, PA, and Redemption Hill Church in Round Rock, Texas. Ken was one of our first-generation pastors. And this conference simply isn't the same without him.

Shortly before he died, Ken sent this email to me: "Went into hospice on Monday. They think at most 21 days, most likely 14. Been in the hospital a lot, very weak, lost lots of weight. Happy to be home for good. I doubt you'll hear from me again. Thanks for everything. I'm grateful for your ministry and influence on our lives."

Look at what it looks like to die well. The man goes out doing what he did throughout his pastoral ministry—encouraging others. Then the email finishes with, "See you on the other side of the river." May we all die so well.

Sitting here in the front row is his wife, Beth, his glory. If you don't know Beth, listen to the following description of Beth by my wife, Carolyn. Carolyn writes, "Beth has a huge heart of compassion and lives to serve others, starting with her family and anyone else who crosses her path. Her loving care and inspiring example have had a profound impact on everyone who knows her."

So well said, Carolyn. So true, Beth. Beth, in the midst of your grief, please know that throughout Sovereign Grace, we carry you very much on our hearts and in our heart. We pray for you daily as you embark on this new season. Thank you for the way you served so magnificently at your husband's side. What a statement it is that you're here. It's all you really need to know about Beth—she's here. We can't thank you enough for your example and the invaluable contribution your husband made and continues to make with his enduring example, and that you continue to make. So please receive the love of everyone in this room this evening.

I'm looking for a quote I have here by Packer and I've misplaced it, so I'm going to find it. Because when I read it, I thought, wow, this just reminds me of Ken. I thought of Ken when I read this exhortation from Dr. Packer in his book. Dr. Packer wrote:

"Runners in a distance race always try to keep something in reserve for a final sprint. And my contention is going to be that, so far as our bodily health allows, we should aim to be found running the last lap of our Christian life, as we would say, flat out. The final sprint, so our age should be a sprint indeed." And Ken's was a sprint.

My aging pastors, by the grace of God—obviously health permitting, although even our health can't limit us from running the final race flat out in our hearts, with our lives, in any way that is possible at that time—that is the way I want, by the grace of God, to finish my life. Flat out. Final sprint. Ken modeled that for us, and Ken has left us an example to emulate.

So, aging pastor, like Paul, like Ken, let's prepare for our departure. Let's purpose that the last lap of our race will be a flat-out sprint, serving the local church, again, according to our gifts, according to our health, according to our capacity, and informed by the counsel and recommendation of the pastoral team that we serve.

By the way, older pastors, I need your attention for just a moment here. One way we can prepare the younger pastors for our departure is to make it easy for the younger pastors we serve with to have the conversation about our transition to a different role on the pastoral team or in the church. Let's initiate that. Let's initiate this hard conversation. Let's initiate it, because those who are younger, they're reluctant to initiate this conversation. As aging pastors, let's initiate this conversation with them.

Younger pastors, I'd like to address you briefly. I'd like to encourage you to make sure you appreciate the gift you have in an older, wiser, experienced pastor. I trust you know me well

enough—I trust I have home field advantage here—I trust you know me well enough to not think that this is self-serving for me to address you and encourage you in this way. It's not self-serving. The pastoral team where I have the privilege of serving in Louisville—that pastoral team has certainly, they have excelled in their appreciation for Gary, Bob and me. So just receive this, not as a scolding—receive it as a friendly reminder, unless it's an appropriate scolding—receive it as a friendly reminder of the gift older pastors are to you and your church.

What a resource these men are meant to be to you and your church, providing you with wisdom and protecting you from mistakes that they made. They have walked on the ground of suffering. It's not theoretical to them. They return from that to help you with a biblical perspective of suffering and how you can care for those who are encountering and enduring suffering. Take advantage of aging pastors—take advantage of their wisdom drawn from these years of experience.

By the way, don't forget all you've learned and inherited from them and from Sovereign Grace. I've recently been reading a new book titled *History Matters* by David McCullough. His daughter has compiled a collection of his speeches and essays and tributes, interviews, and some more personal items for the reader. And in a chapter titled "Why History," Mr. McCullough said the following in a speech: "At their core, the lessons of history are largely lessons in appreciation. Everything we have—all our great institutions, hospitals, universities, libraries, cities, our laws, our music, art, poetry, our freedom—everything exists because somebody went before us and did the hard work, provided the creative energy, provided the money, provided the belief. Do we disregard that? Indifference to history isn't just ignorant, it's rude, it's a form of ingratitude."

Oh, my friend, all of us, without exception, all of us get to where we are because somebody went before us and did the hard work. All of us this evening are standing on the shoulders of others, benefiting—immeasurably benefiting—in countless ways from their example and teaching. All of us. Listen, not just the shoulders of Piper and Spurgeon. No, I'm talking about the shoulders of men throughout this room who are not high profile, well-known pastors, and those men must not be overlooked in their invaluable contribution to Sovereign Grace and the next generation of pastors in Sovereign Grace.

They are scattered throughout this room. These are men who have fought the good fight. They have run the race. They have guarded the gospel. These are men who one day the Lord Himself will award each of them the crown of righteousness.

Jon, Mark, and I—we deeply appreciate the way you have avoided this plight of ignoring and disregarding our history. But instead, you have modeled gratefulness for those who went before you and did the hard work of building Sovereign Grace. You have modeled this, and that is a gift to those of us who were here in the beginning.

By the way, this has been my experience as well with the second and third generation of pastors in Sovereign Grace. It's just a reminder to not forget those who went before us and did the hard work. A transition is definitely underway in Sovereign Grace, and man, that transition brings this aging founder and pastor great joy. I love the way John Stott describes this transition in his commentary where he writes:

“Our God is the God of history. God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year. He buries His workmen, but carries on His work. The torch of the gospel is handed down by each generation to the next. As the leaders of the former generation die, it is all the more urgent for those of the next generation to step forward bravely to take their place. We cannot rest forever on the leadership of the preceding generation. The day comes when we must step into their shoes and ourselves take the lead.”

That day had come for Timothy, and it comes to all of us in time. And it's coming to the second and third generation of pastors in this room. As that day approaches, when you must step into our shoes, when a number of us aren't here anymore, you are called to step into our shoes. You just make sure it's our theological shoes you are stepping in. You do not need to buy new shoes. You don't need to borrow somebody else's shoes. Shoes have been left behind for you. By the way, I'm very grateful for all the ways that you are doing this.

Finally, Paul turns his attention, and Timothy's attention, and our attention to the future. A Future Crown (verse 8): Paul's Dying Perspective of the Future

Paul's dying perspective of the future is our motivation for finishing strong and dying well. What he writes in verse 8 is ultimately what we are living for and what we are looking forward to. Paul anticipates a heavenly reward—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that day.

I can still remember, I think, when I even first read that—hearing that Paul, the Apostle Paul, anticipates receiving a heavenly reward from the Lord Himself—well, that perhaps is no surprise, but what Paul then writes is absolutely wonderful news for ordinary pastors like you and me: "and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing."

All those who are justified by faith alone in Christ alone and live faithfully for Christ by the grace of God will receive the crown of righteousness, which the Lord Himself, the righteous judge, will award to each. This is only possible because of what Christ accomplished at His first appearing. Ordinary pastors like you and me, who by the grace of God fight the good fight, finish the race, guard the treasure of the gospel, fulfill our ministry, can anticipate receiving a crown of righteousness on that day from the Lord Himself. We can anticipate receiving a crown of righteousness because He wore a crown of thorns for us—so that our sins might be forgiven, so that our service might be sanctified.

Paul makes it clear that the crown awaits those who love His appearing. In his commentary, George Knight makes this important point about this verse when he writes:

“Those who will receive the crown are defined in terms of their love for Christ's return. Notice the second sentence: The perfect tense signifies that this love has constantly characterized their lives.”

So, my friends, it is this love—this love for Christ, Christ Himself, this longing for His appearing and His return—this love, most importantly, is to constantly characterize our lives. This promise of a crown is made to those who love Jesus Christ. This is the example an aging pastor is to set

for the church. This is the legacy an aging pastor is to leave behind—a deepening love for Jesus Christ and a deepening longing for His appearing. We want this to be the defining distinctive of a Sovereign Grace pastor.

As a way to honor John Piper, when I started to prepare this message, I just thought, "OK, I want to honor John and his friendship with us and how he has served us. So, I want to honor him by quoting him at some point in this message," and finding, as you imagine, an appropriate quote wasn't difficult at all. But for me, there's a post our friend John Piper wrote years ago that remains one of my favorites in all his prolific writing. I was so affected by it, I asked my excellent assistant at the time, Bethany Payne (now Bethany Chesemore) to create an attractive background picture where these words could be displayed, so that I might read this on a regular basis, which she kindly did.

The title of the post is simply, "I Love Jesus Christ: An Unforgettable Moment in Seminary," and that unforgettable moment took place after a class one day. When a group of students were gathered around a professor named James Morgan after a class he taught on systematic theology, John writes:

"A group of us were huddled around James Morgan, the young theology teacher, who was saying something about the engagement of Christians and social justice. I don't remember what I said, but he looked me right in the eye and said, 'John, I love Jesus Christ.' It was like a thunderclap in my heart. A strong, intelligent, mature, socially engaged man had just said out loud, in front of a half-dozen men, 'I love Jesus Christ.' He was not preaching. He was not pronouncing on any issue. He was not singing in church. He was not trying to get a job. He was not being recorded. He was telling me that he loved Jesus. The echo of that thunderclap is still sounding in my heart. That was 40 years ago. There are a thousand things I don't remember about those days in seminary, but that afternoon remains unforgettable. And all he said was: 'John, I love Jesus Christ.'"

And then John writes:

"So here, as I crafted this post at the beginning of 2009, I join James Morgan in saying, I love Jesus Christ. And as I say it, I want to make clear what I mean."

I very much appreciate John saying what he meant, because in our culture today it's crucially important we make clear what we mean when we say, "I love Jesus Christ." So John writes:

"I admire Jesus Christ more than any other human or angelic being. I enjoy his ways and his words more than I enjoy the ways and words of anyone else. I want his approval more than I want the approval of anyone else. I want to be with him more than I want to be with anyone else. I feel more grateful to him for what he has done for me than I do to anyone else. I trust his word more fully than I trust what anyone else says. I am more glad in His exaltation than in the exaltation of anyone else, including me. Would you pray with me that in 2009—so let's just replace that with the appropriate year—would you pray with me that we would love Jesus Christ more than we ever have, and may our Lord Jesus grant that from time to time we would deliver

quietly and naturally a thunderclap into the hearts of others with the simple words, 'I love Jesus Christ.'"

Folks, this is the example that was on full display in the life and the ministry of the apostle Paul. And this is the example we must display for those we serve. This is the legacy that we must leave behind—a deepening love for Jesus Christ and a deepening longing for His appearing. This must be the aim of our preaching; this must be the purpose of our preaching and pastoral ministry—the creation of a people who love Him, a creation of a people who love His appearing. This is what we want to be the defining distinctive of Sovereign Grace pastors. We love Jesus Christ. We love Jesus Christ.

This is the aim; this is the purpose of our preaching. This is who we love more than we love pastoral ministry, more than we love preaching, certainly more than we love recognition of any kind. We love Jesus Christ.

Our friends, death is waiting for all of us. At the appointed time, death is coming for each of us. No doubt, for some of us, death will come sooner than we might think this evening. So, let's purpose to prepare for our departure so that regardless of when we die, we will have been poured out like a drink offering, serving our family and our church. By the grace of God, let us be able to say with Paul at the end of our lives, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Let us be able to say to the next generation of pastors, "You do the same and you fulfill your ministry. And I will see you on the other side of the river." Let's go.

The only appropriate response to this passage is to say—we do love Jesus Christ. And we love Him because You first loved us. We do pray for the future of Sovereign Grace represented in this room, that this would be the defining distinctive—that when individuals attend our churches, that when individuals engage us in conversation, that they would leave a conversation with us aware that guy loves Jesus Christ. That the effect of our sermons would be a deepening love, week by week by week by week—a deepening love in the congregation for Jesus Christ, a deepening longing for His appearing.

Would You have mercy on us, Lord? Would You deepen—please, deepen—our love for Your Son, whom we do love. Please deepen that love, Father, so that we might fight the good fight, finish the race, guard the treasure of the gospel, and fulfill our ministry—all for Your glory, all by Your grace, all because of the cross. In Jesus' name, amen.