

## Last Things First

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by Dan Shipley

**The scene is Shechem.** The occasion is Joshua's farewell address just prior to his death. All the tribes of Israel are assembled to hear the aged Joshua, now 110, as he begins recounting God's dealings with their great nation. Showing that God has continually been with and helping them, he concludes, "*Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth...*" (Joshua 24:16).

**The scene is Jerusalem.** David is nigh unto death as he gives this last charge to his son Solomon: "*go the way of all the earth; be strong, therefore, and prove yourself a man. And keep the charge of the LORD your God: to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His judgments, and His testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn*" (1 Kings 2:2-3)

**The scene is a Roman prison.** Paul is writing his last epistle. In giving his final charge to Timothy, he reminds the young evangelist not to be ashamed of the gospel (2 Timothy 1:8); to hold the pattern of sound words (1:13); to suffer hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus (2:3); to give diligence to present himself approved unto God (2:15) and to persevere with urgency in preaching the word (4:2) with the assurance that a crown of righteousness awaits all the faithful (4:8).

Such are the words with which these great men of God conclude the final chapter of their earthly existence. The last words of any dying man are generally regarded as having special significance, but the words of these men ought to be especially so regarded – not so much because of being last words necessarily, but because of who they were and what they said with these words.

Joshua, David and Paul were men who had given most of their lives in consecrated service to the Lord. God had used their tongues and talents extensively to serve His purposes among men. Through experience and revelation they accumulated such wisdom as experienced by few mortals. Joshua, for instance, **knew** how the lack of faith could prevent one's entering into God's rest. David **understood** about temptation and sin, and Paul himself had made the transition from "*chief of sinners*" to ambassador for Christ. As few others could, they perceived how the will of God compliments the greatest needs of man – so their last words deserve an attentive hearing.

And what do we hear? Though different in expression and separated by hundreds of years, we hear messages that are strikingly similar. All emphatically recommend to others the same course they have now finished. All emphasize serving the Lord. Essentially, they are saying to all who shall come after them, "Live for the Lord!" or, as another wise man put it, "*fear God and keep His commandments.*" After all, that's what living is all about. Theirs is a lesson we must learn! Apart from truly reverencing God and walking in His ways, man can have no meaningful existence here nor hope of life in the hereafter. As those destined to go the way of all the earth, may the last words of these godly men find first priority in our lives.

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