

**Bethel Christian Fellowship
Fair Lawn, NJ**

**The Message of 2 Timothy (1):
“An Introduction to Paul’s Last Will and Testament”**

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John Newton was one of the most influential Christians in eighteenth century England. But he never forgot what he once was. In spite of his mother’s early Christian influence (she died when he was six), he became an outspoken atheist, a vile blasphemer, and was entrenched in the atrocities of the African slave trade. But when he was dramatically saved by God’s “Amazing Grace,” he wanted to remember what he had been and how God had mercy on him. So, he wrote the words of Deuteronomy 15:15 over the mantel in his study; “*You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you.*”

Years later, as he was lying on his death bed, a fellow minister of the gospel came for a brief visit. When he left, he recorded what he had seen and heard: “I saw Mr. Newton near the closing scene. He was hardly able to talk; and all I had written down upon my leaving him was this: ‘My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.’”

In the same way, Paul’s second letter to Timothy was written near “the closing scene” of his life. As we read it, it’s like listening in on a dying father whispering a few last words to his beloved son in the faith. This will be the last letter Paul will ever write. He’s now imprisoned in Rome, awaiting his execution. His crime was preaching the gospel of Christ and practicing a faith that was outlawed throughout the Roman Empire.

Unlike his last imprisonment, where he stayed “*in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him*” (Acts 28:30), Paul was now chained like a common criminal in a cold, damp dungeon (1:16; 2:9; 4:13). Even his friends had a hard time finding out where he was being kept (1:17). His work was done, his days were numbered, and he desperately longed to see Timothy before it was too late: “*Do your best to come to me quickly When you come bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments . . . Do your best to get here before winter*” (4:9, 13, 21).

But Timothy was 1,000 miles away, overseeing the ministry of the Ephesian church (modern Turkey). If he were to sail to Rome, he could make the trip in a couple of weeks. If he were to travel by land, it would take a month or two, even by traveling on Rome’s well-built, stone-paved roads. Unfortunately, we don’t know if Timothy ever made it to Paul’s prison cell.

But he did receive Paul’s letter (about AD 67), and there’s no doubt Paul intended the letter to be read to the entire church (4:21). In God’s providence, it made its way into the New Testament canon, so that we too can draw close to the aged apostle and hear the whisper of his last words to the church. In the words of John Stott, “Although it was an intensely personal communication to his young friend Timothy, it was also – and consciously – his last will and testament to the church” (Guard the Gospel).

Thankfully, this brief letter includes Paul's classic statement about the inspiration of Scripture, and how it is profitable "*for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness . . .*" (3:16-17). It also includes Paul's final testimony: "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*" (4:7).

But more than anything else, Second Timothy is a bold, clear call to persevere in the faith. It is filled with one crisp command after another: "***stir up the gift of God within you;***" (1:6); "***do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord***" (1:8a); "***join with me in suffering for the gospel***" (1:8b); "***Hold fast to the pattern of sound teaching***" (1:13); "***Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you***" (1:14); "***Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus***" (2:1); "***Endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ***" (2:3); "***Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead***" (2:8); "***Be diligent to present yourself approved unto God***" (2:15); "***Avoid godless chatter***" (2:16); "***Flee . . . and pursue***" (2:22); "***Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments;***" (2:23); "***Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of***" (3:14); "***Preach the Word***" (4:1); "***Be on your guard***" (4:15). These are the directives of Paul's last will and testament.

The reason for these repeated exhortations was because of the threat posed by false teachers. Although the church was experiencing fierce persecution under Nero (as evidenced by Paul's impending martyrdom), Paul was more concerned about those who were corrupting the church from within. As he will write toward the end of his letter, "*For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths*" (4:3-4). Hence Paul's concern for Timothy to retain the standard of sound doctrine that Timothy had heard from him.

"In each chapter," writes John Stott, "Paul returned to the same basic concern, or some aspect of it. Indeed, we may summarize the message of the letter in terms of a four-fold charge:

Chapter 1: The charge to guard the gospel.

Guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us (1:14).

Chapter 2: The charge to suffer for the gospel.

Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Jesus Christ . . . Remember Jesus Christ . . . as preached in my gospel, the gospel for which I am suffering and wearing fetters like a criminal (2:3, 8, 9).

Chapter 3: The charge to continue in the gospel.

Evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed . . . (3:13, 14).

Chapter 4: The charge to proclaim the gospel.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus . . . : preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching (4:1, 2).

Given this emphasis, the church of our day urgently needs to heed the message of II Timothy. Sadly, there are many so-called evangelicals who are loosening their grasp of the gospel. The preaching of the Word of truth is being replaced by other kinds of presentations. Video clips, Christian entertainment, praise bands, worship team performances and “seeker services” seem to be capturing everyone’s attention on Sunday mornings.

What’s worse, fewer and fewer ministers are willing to spend the time and energy that’s necessary to expound the Scriptures; and there are many ministers who are neither gifted nor trained to do this difficult work. What’s even worse, the people in the pews don’t even know how malnourished they really are. They seem to be just fine with their Sunday morning spiritual snacks.

There are also so-called evangelicals who have let the Word of truth drop from their grasp altogether. Consider, for example, the terribly wrong views of the founder and former minister of a PCA mega church in NYC: “You can believe homosexuality is a sin and still believe that same-sex marriage should be legal. These are not the same issues. They overlap. For Christians, same-sex marriage shouldn’t be a problem because it’s not our position to try to legislate Christian morality” (2013). He is but *one* example of how ministers throughout the country have been swept from their moorings by the powerful floodtide of a secular society.

Timothy, however, is called to be different from the way the world thinks and acts. More than anything else, Paul would have his young friend *continue* in what he has heard and come to believe. Never mind if Nero is determined to destroy the church; never mind if false teachers are on the rise; never mind if “*everyone in the province of Asia*” (1:15) has deserted Paul; never mind if others are compromising the truths of God’s Word in order to placate a hostile and secular society. *Guard* the precious truth of the gospel. Be prepared to stand your ground, and if need be, to *suffer* for the gospel. *Continue* in what you have firmly believed, and be faithful in *proclaiming* the gospel, at all times.

In 1897, Rudyard Kipling wrote a novel called Captains Courageous (you may have seen the movie). It follows the adventures of the fifteen-year-old son of a railroad tycoon, after he is saved from drowning by a Portuguese fisherman in the North Atlantic. In 1900 Theodore Roosevelt praised Kipling for describing “in the liveliest way what a boy should be and do.”

In the same way, Paul is describing what his young son in the faith “should be and do.” In his last will and testament for the church, he is calling upon us to be *Christians Courageous*. Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to carry out Paul’s final directives for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ – by His grace and for His glory.