

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 16 – 2 Timothy

This second letter to Timothy is the most personal of the pastoral epistles and was much more difficult to write than Paul's first letter to him. Previously, the apostle had been held captive in Rome but had freedom to move about somewhat freely within the prison system, to converse with friends and to write letters to several churches. This time, he is older and weaker, chained in a dungeon which is dark and cold, he is cut off from friends except for Luke to whom he is probably dictating this letter, and Paul is very soon to be put to death. Understanding these circumstances goes a long way in our coming to appreciate the meaning of the letter itself and its depth of expression.

The primary purpose for this letter is to call Timothy to faithful service as a fully committed pastor and teacher – not implying that Timothy has shown any signs of weakness – but it is important for the future wellbeing of the Church, particularly now in a time of strong resistance to the gospel from the unbelieving world all around and when too many other church leaders, crippled by the fear of man, are running away.

A secondary purpose for the letter, though still compelling and urgent, is to present a personal plea calling Timothy, Paul's long-time friend and travelling companion, to come and visit him before his upcoming execution. Knowing that this will surely be the last time he will see him again in this world, the apostle longs for the comforting fellowship of this younger friend, someone he regards as his beloved son in the faith. On account of all the difficulties – so many false teachers within the Church and a growing number of persecutors on the outside threatening to destroy her – Timothy undoubtedly longs for the counsel and encouragement of his spiritual father as well, but he would greatly prefer it, of course, without the threat of his imminent death. These are perilous times.

In chapter 1 Paul writes of how he has been praying for Timothy and desires to see him, and, as he calls to mind his genuine faith, he instructs him with every word of encouragement to be faithful to the Lord in his life and ministry, and to continue faithful to him also. Timothy has had to suffer for the cause of Christ, but so, too, has Paul, yet through it all Paul is not ashamed of the gospel but seeks

to be faithful to the Lord regardless of the personal cost because he knows Him in whom he has believed and is persuaded that He is able to keep him to the end.

It is especially important that Timothy be faithful in these days because so many others in Asia have proved unfaithful and have turned their backs on Paul, a fact which the apostle finds most disappointing, a fact which makes him appreciate Onesiphorus all the more in that he did not turn away but ministered to the apostle's needs in every way he could. Is it not so, dear Christian, that, while we prize the friendship of those who support us in times of trouble, we cherish that support even more when so many others have turned against us?

In chapter 2 Timothy is called to stand strong, not in himself, but in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Moreover, he is to commit what he has learned to faithful men who will be able, in turn, to teach others. He is to endure hardship as a good soldier, to keep the rules as an athlete who seeks to be crowned, and to be hardworking as a farmer who is first to partake of the crops. Paul cites himself as one who is in chains, yet the word of God is not chained, and for that reason he is prepared to fight manfully onward in propagating it.

Timothy is then instructed to remind those who are set apart for the gospel ministry of these same things. Let them discern the Word of God, casting aside profane and idle babblings, and be assured that the Lord knows those who are His own. Let each one serve the Lord as a vessel of honour, prepared for every good work and pursuing righteousness with a pure heart. Let them know that God is able to crush the most steadfast resistance, granting repentance to those who have been taken captive by the devil that they may escape his deadly snare.

What important counsel this is to elders, especially pastors, as they seek to fulfill their calling as under-shepherds of the flock of God, particularly now in our own day when Christianity has been so marginalized, when churches have lost some of the most basic liberties they formerly enjoyed, and when believers – those who dare to speak out – have been threatened, fined, and even imprisoned! We can too easily forget that civilizations have not always respected the Church or appreciated her role as the pillar and ground of truth. As it was in Paul's day, so we, too, are beginning to see again how Christians are considered the enemy of the state, and that pastors need therefore to equip their flock with the sound teaching of Holy Scripture, preparing them for the relentless persecution to come.

In chapter 3 we are taught the principle of the progress of evil, the fact that, left to itself, it will always go from bad to worse. We see this in the world generally, and should understand that – as time goes on, and especially where the preaching of the gospel has taken little or no root – the end of this present world, the grand climax of human history, will reveal just how corrupt and utterly wicked lost souls handed over to go their own way can actually become.

We see this same principle of evil at work, however, not only in the world generally, but even in the Church specifically, within the sphere of professed Christianity, and the Bible describes this as a falling away or apostasy. Do we not see evidence of this all around us, people who call themselves Christians but who reveal over time, and increasingly so, that they have no real appetite for the truth? Is this not in fact the reason why in our own day we find so many ‘churches’, mainline or otherwise, which either no longer preach the Word of God or have, one after another, closed their doors? It gets so bad that, eventually, everyone must recognize it.

Here we see another principle at work, namely, that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. The faithful, therefore, should expect it as an inevitable part of life and not let it take them by surprise. Not all will face the same kind of persecution, of course, or to the same degree, but just as there is nothing like the truth as it is in Jesus to unite those who embrace it, so, too, there is nothing like that same truth to separate them from those who oppose it.

How should Timothy respond to these things? The answer is to continue in what he has learned from childhood and to be assured that the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make sinners wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, are given by inspiration of God, are therefore inerrant, profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction and instruction in righteousness. The Word of God is given to us as the only infallible rule of faith and life, containing everything one needs to serve the Lord faithfully and to be fully equipped for effective service.

Oh, that every pastor may be so assured, confident of this unchanging standard, and fully committed to living his own life according to every word that proceeds from the mouth of God! Let him pledge with the prophet Micaiah, “As the Lord lives, whatever the Lord says to me, that I will speak” (1 Kings 22:14).

In the light of all this, and how God is pleased to use the biblical message to convey sinners out of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son, chapter 4 is a charge to Timothy and to pastor-teachers everywhere to preach that Word, the whole counsel of God. Let them always be ready to do so, both in the pulpit and out of it, and in this way fulfill their calling as ministers of the Word of God.

Paul earlier wrote of how he was not ashamed of the gospel, and now, with the time of his being offered up unto death close at hand, he looks back and declares that he has fought the good fight and kept the faith. This is not bragging, nor has he lost any sense of his being the chief of sinners; he is just so thankful, rather, for what the Lord has called and equipped him to do, the fact that He has been with him all the way and demonstrated His power in doing so. This is a time for Paul to look back, but it is also a time for his looking ahead to the crown of righteousness which is to be given to all who love the Lord and await His appearing.

It is noteworthy that, for all the suffering which the apostle endured over the course of his ministry (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-33), his focus here is on the victory of believers, the power of the gospel, God's blessing on his ministry, the hope we may have in Christ Jesus, and how it is all to our Lord's glorious praise! Let every man entering the gospel ministry keep all these same things in mind, let him wholly commit himself to preaching Christ and Him crucified, and let him stay so focused despite all the trials and tribulations the Lord may yet send his way.

Paul longs, as I say, to see Timothy one last time. He requests that he bring Mark with him. It is these younger men he wishes to prepare for future ministry and whose fellowship is so uplifting to him. He also requests the cloak he left behind in Troas, along with certain books which could be especially useful to him now. These are personal elements of the letter, along with the closing words of greeting, all of which show us the tender side of Paul and are very touching as we consider the countless souls, among them many faithful pastors, who have finished the race and entered into eternal glory before us.

Rev. Tom Aicken