

“Overcoming Discouragement”
2 Timothy 1:1-14
November 1, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

We’re beginning today a study of Paul’s second letter to Timothy. The tone of this letter is very different from Paul’s first letter. That one was written to charge Timothy to set things straight in the church at Ephesus, where some false teachers had made some significant inroads. Paul was attempting to instruct Timothy and support him in this effort. The tone of this second letter is much more personal, because the problem had shifted from a need in the church of Ephesus to one in Timothy’s own life.

Things were not going well for Timothy. His mentor and good friend, Paul, was back in jail. This time, the outlook was bleak. Since no one came to his defense at the first hearing (4:16), Paul was not optimistic for an acquittal. Many of his friends had abandoned him, and he believed that he would soon die (4:6-8). This was not the outcome Timothy had imagined, and Paul is concerned that Timothy will grow so discouraged that he will end up following the path of Demas, who deserted both Paul and the faith. So he writes this very personal letter in an attempt to encourage Timothy and keep him from being ashamed of the gospel.

The issue addressed in this book has continuing relevance for us. If Paul is serving the Lord of the universe, why does he have to suffer so much? If God has invaded the world and is going about the purpose of bringing in his kingdom of peace, why does it seem that everything is going wrong? Why does the Church struggle so much? It often seems that we are so small and inconsequential in the big picture. Many faithful churches struggle just to keep the bills paid. Businesses and public institutions seem to have abundant resources, while the church struggles. It is easy to grow discouraged in the face of such obstacles. Timothy was showing signs of this, to the point that he was becoming ashamed of the gospel. Paul responds by reminding him of several truths that will lift his discouragement. Let’s look at three of them from this chapter, the remembrance of which will bring encouragement.

I. Remember Your Family

It is always encouraging to know that you have a family who loves you, and Paul reminds Timothy several times in these opening verses that he has such a loving family. Specifically, he has a mother and grandmother who are believers in Christ. Timothy’s family is first introduced in the book of Acts, where Timothy is described as **“the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek”** (16:1). Now Paul gives us the names of these two women in Timothy’s life, as he remarks on their faith. **“I am reminded of your sincere**

faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice” (v. 5). We learn from these two verses that Timothy’s father was absent, at least spiritually, if not also physically. We all know the social problems that can result from absent fathers. Thank the Lord, though, for faithful grandmothers such as Lois. She passed along a sincere faith to her daughter and then her grandson.

Timothy’s earthly father may have been absent, but he had a father in the faith—Paul. Paul reminds Timothy of this right off the bat, in the address of this letter, **“To Timothy, my beloved child”** (v. 2). Parents are so committed to the welfare of their children that children maintain the capacity to bring great suffering or great joy to their parents as long as both live. No matter how old children are, they have this power over their parents. That’s why Paul said that he remembered Timothy constantly in his prayers night and day (v. 3). Every parent knows what that means, especially if a child is facing a particular hardship. If you have a child who is seriously ill, you will think of that child throughout the day and night. And if you are a Christian, you will pray in response to that concern. That’s why Paul prayed for Timothy.

Considered from a human perspective, Timothy could easily have ended up being another Demas were it not for his spiritual father and his grandmother. If you’re a grandmother, or may someday become a grandmother, let me encourage you to make it your goal to be a Grandmother Lois. You may be the instrument God uses to preserve your grandchildren in the faith as you pray for them and model for them an authentic faith in Jesus. Or God might be calling you to be a spiritual father to a young Timothy somewhere. Again, you could be the very instrument God will use to make a difference in that young man’s life.

II. Remember the Gift of the Holy Spirit

Commentators are split on the question of what gift Paul means when he tells Timothy to **“fan into flame the gift of God”** (v. 6). Paul says that this gift was given to Timothy at his ordination, when Paul laid hands on him. I think it refers to the gift of God’s Holy Spirit enabling Timothy to minister effectively. Timothy had the Spirit at his salvation, but this refers to the unique gifts the Spirit brings at ordination. I almost always agree with the translators of the ESV Bibles we use here, but in the case of verse 7 I am of a different opinion. They use a lower case “s” in the word *spirit*, indicating their view that this refers to the human spirit. I believe it should have been a capital “S” referring to the Holy Spirit.

As Timothy was battling discouragement, Paul wanted to remind him that the Holy Spirit delivers us from fear. Why would Timothy be afraid? Have you ever known someone who got in trouble with the law? You tend to want to distance yourself from such a person, especially if you have done the same thing they were arrested for doing. Paul was in trouble with the law because of his preaching, and now finds himself in prison. Timothy had done the same thing, and is now

battling fear. So Paul reminds him that the Holy Spirit delivers us from fear. We are not to fear anything other than God himself because whatever we fear will control us, and we were made only for God's control. If you fear poverty, then you will be controlled by the need to put a great distance between yourself and poverty, with the result that you begin hoarding money. If you fear things outside of your control, like getting cancer or losing your job because of economic downturns, then you will be controlled by worry. So Paul reminds Timothy that life in the Spirit is a life free from all fears. Don't you want to live with that kind of freedom? I notice how Paul exhibited this freedom from fear in the remarkable statement of verse 8. **"Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner."** He called himself the Lord's prisoner, not Rome's prisoner. He was acknowledging Jesus' lordship over all of life, and it was that acknowledgement that delivered him from fear. So if you are poor, you need to come to the place of calling yourself "The Lord's poor man." If you are sick, you are the Lord's patient. These things don't need to be feared; they need to be brought under the Lord's control of our lives. It is the Holy Spirit who helps us do so.

Paul describes the alternative to a life of fear. As we fan into flame the gift of God's Spirit, we become those characterized by power, love and a sound mind. All three of these are necessary if we are to serve God as we ought. A church leader such as Timothy would need power. It seems clear from the various passages in the New Testament that speak of Timothy, that he did not have a naturally forceful personality. He lacked power in himself. But God's Spirit has power in abundance and could give Timothy all he needed. But power without love is ugly, harmful and even demonic. So the Spirit adds love to that, making sure the power is put to good use. These two qualities of love and power need to be joined together, because love without power is pitiful. And then prudence or a sound mind is needed, that the man or woman with power and love might have the wisdom to know how to use these qualities. So those with the Spirit don't need to fear and be discouraged because we have all we need to move forward in life.

Are you discouraged now about something in your life? Maybe you're getting a little depressed about it. Your need is to move forward, and it is looking to God's Spirit for power, love and a sound mind that will enable you to do so. But exactly how does that work? Paul says to Timothy that he needs to fan into flame this gift of the Spirit. The metaphor is a common one. We've all seen the coals that are left in the fire after the flames die down. The coals can lie there for a long time and still retain their heat. You can come along hours later and remove the ashes from the coals, put little sticks on top of the coals, and begin blowing on them. Before long, the dry kindling will burst into flame. Pour on the oxygen and provide fuel, and the flame will come. How is it that we pour the oxygen on so that this flame will ignite in our hearts? Let's consider that in our third point.

III. Remember the Gospel

Paul knows that it is through believing the gospel that we pump oxygen onto the fire of God's Spirit, making it burn high and bright. So from verses 8-14, he reminds Timothy of the gospel. It is very helpful to see that Paul gets into a discussion of the gospel by urging Timothy not to **"be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner"** (v. 8). To be ashamed of the gospel is the opposite of believing it. Shame is probably the strongest of all human emotions, causing us to want to cover up the source of the shame. One of my common nightmares is that I find myself in some public setting with an insufficient amount of clothing on my body. It is a nightmare because I want to hide but cannot manage to do so. It is easy to be embarrassed by the gospel, with its talk of sin, guilt, judgment and salvation by grace through faith. Listen to these words from Thomas Oden:

Academic theology remains ashamed of the apostolic testimony. I teach in a seminary. I know how embarrassed we professors are about the gospel and how hard we work to try to make the gospel conveniently acceptable to the modern mind. We will do almost anything to get wider university applause. We are ashamed of the fact that God hates sin, that we are sinners, that human history remains a history of sin, that God has suffered vicariously for us in order to redeem us from sin.

To believe the gospel is the opposite of being ashamed of it. It is to be willing to **"suffer for the gospel by the power of God"** (v. 8). The only way not to be ashamed of the gospel is to understand its meaning, so Paul gives a wonderful summary of the gospel in verses 9-10. It is impossible to believe what he says here and be ashamed of the gospel. Let me summarize it like this. The gospel is good news of God's salvation. It is God's power, by which he **"saved us."** It is good news, not just good advice. God's salvation is not just fire insurance to help us escape the fires of hell. It results in a **"holy calling,"** with the result that our lives are transformed as we are given a reason to live. And this was done by the grace of God, **"not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began."** This is a staggering truth. Prior to Genesis 1:1 and the creation of the world, God gave us his grace in Christ Jesus. He did this before we could do anything good or bad. God has a purpose to bless us with his grace, and he will not be deterred.

This is not just some vague philosophy, but something that has been made manifest in history. It has now **"been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."** Through Jesus, fallen humanity can live forever. The gospel is God's plan for restoring all things, for bringing in God's kingdom of life and peace. And it will come not through worldly power, but in the same pattern as Jesus' life, the pattern of death and resurrection. It will come through suffering followed by God's power.

Several weeks ago, I heard an NPR interview with a military historian who was talking about the difficulties invading armies have had in Afghanistan over the centuries. The topography of that nation neutralizes the power of large armies. As

I listened to him speak, it occurred to me with clear conviction that there is an army that could conquer that nation. An army of missionaries, carrying no guns or earthly weapons, could in time conquer that challenging nation in the name of King Jesus, bringing in his kingdom of peace. Undoubtedly, lives would be lost, the lives of the missionaries themselves. But since the gospel is the power of God, and since God's power can do what no earthly army can accomplish, the deed could be done.

Are you fanning into flame the gift of God's Spirit by believing this gospel? Let me remind you again that it is good news, and not just good advice. In his book *Christless Christianity*, Michael Horton describes a scene from the television show *ER*. A retired police officer is lying in a hospital bed dying from cancer. He confesses to the hospital chaplain his long-held guilt over allowing an innocent man to be framed and executed. Horton describes the scene.

He asks, "How can I even hope for forgiveness?" and the chaplain replies, "I think sometimes it's easier to feel guilty than forgiven." "Which means *what*?" "That maybe your guilt over his death has become your reason for living. Maybe you need a new reason to go on." "I don't want to 'go on,'" says the dying man. "Can't you see that I'm dying? The only thing that is holding me back is that I'm afraid—I'm afraid of what comes next." "What do you think that is?" the chaplain gently inquires. Growing impatient, the man answers, "*You tell me*. Is atonement possible? What does God *want* from me?"... Missing the point of this man's struggle, the chaplain collects herself and says in the familiar tone of condescension disguised as understanding, "I hear that you're frustrated, but you need to ask yourself—" "No," the man interrupts, "I don't need to ask myself anything. I need *answers* and all of your questions and all your uncertainty are only making things worse." With no more to evaluate than his tone, she encourages calm. "I know you're upset," she begins, provoking his final outburst of frustration: "God, I need someone who will look me in the eye and tell me how to find *forgiveness*, because *I am running out of time!*" (p. 37).

CONCLUSION:

The gospel Paul proclaimed has answers that satisfy the soul. Let me point out something significant. Do you remember how we saw in Paul's first letter to Timothy that he felt himself to be the chief of sinners (1:15)? Notice now how he says that he serves God "**with a clear conscience**" (v. 3). There is only one way the chief of sinners can have a clear conscience and remain sane. It is through the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. Paul was not ashamed of that, but was convinced of its truth. May God help us to do the same!