



A Study of 1st & 2nd Timothy

I Have Finished the Race 2 Timothy 4:1-8

I am reading from 2nd Timothy 4:1-8.

This is what God's Word says:

^{ESV} **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: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³ 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, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. ⁵ As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. ⁶ For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ 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.

This is the Word of God.

Each new generation of believers is responsible to take up the proclamation of God's Word even as the church at large rejects that word and pursues its own uncrucified lust for novelty, frivolity, and wickedness, and each new generation is especially obligated to do that as the preceding generation of faithful proclaimers of the Word pass off the scene and into the presence of God.

When the school term at Westminster Seminary ended in December 1936, J. Gresham Machen, the founder of the seminary and of our sister denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, was already struggling with an uncomfortable tightness in his chest. We know, of course, in hindsight that the tightness in his chest was a tell-tale sign that he already had pneumonia.

Machen should have gone home and rested up, or better yet he should have checked into the hospital. But he didn't. Instead, he decided to keep a speaking engagement to which he had previously committed himself among a small circle of Presbyterian churches in North Dakota.

When Machen left Philadelphia the air was crisp and cold but bearable. When he arrived in Bismarck, North Dakota the temperature was twenty degrees below zero. The dreadful cold sent Machen into a rapid decline. Machen spent a restless, miserable night coughing, struggling to breathe. Still, the next morning he got up and got dressed and told his host, the Reverend Sam Allen, that he was willing to go wherever he wanted and to speak to whatever group would listen.

Allen put Machen in a car and drove him down to Carson and then on to Leith. Machen spoke that afternoon to a small group of people although he struggled the whole time with a persistent cough. On the way back to Bismarck, Machen

declined even further. By the time he got back to Bismarck, Machen had to be helped out of the car and up to his room. A doctor was called. The doctor medicated Machen and bound his chest which apparently gave him a measure of relief because Machen later kept the speaking engagement that had been set for that night.

The next morning, when the doctor came to check on Machen, Machen had declined to the degree that the doctor called for an ambulance and promptly admitted him in the hospital. Machen died around 7:30 that night. He had spent the day drifting in and out of consciousness. One of the last things he did before he died was to dictate a telegram to John Murray, professor of systematic theology at Westminster Seminary. Machen's last recorded words read, **"I'm so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it."**¹

What a glorious thing for that to be the last thing a person ever wrote.

This week I've been thinking about that a lot. That is I've been thinking about these two phrases: **"It was the last thing he ever said; it was the last thing he ever wrote."**

There is something about those two phrases that has always captivated me. I suppose it's because of my interest in history, and that interest is helped along by the fact that historians used to pay a lot of attention to that sort of thing. They often recorded what famous people said when they died.

For example, we know that the last thing Stonewall Jackson, the famous Confederate General, said before he died was, **"Let us cross over the river, and**

rest under the shade of the trees." You can see that even as he lay dying in a field hospital, he was ever a general, ever a soldier.

We also know the last thing the Protestant reformer Hugh Latimer said to his friend Nicholas Ridley as they were tied to the stake and burned alive in one of the religious purges orchestrated by Queen Bloody Mary. It was this, **"Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man, for we shall this day light such a candle in England as I trust by God's grace shall never be put out."**

I could add to that, of course, the last words of Polycarp, or Tyndale, or Moody, or Cranmer, or Spurgeon, or Bilney or any number of a thousand other unknown Christians and it would give us plenty of material on which we might profitably reflect. That is true because there is something wonderfully clarifying about death...something that puts into perspective once and for all what is really important...what really matters.

I'll never forget the time my good friend Ken Gregson, the former President of Tandycrafts, called me to come and visit him in the hospital after he learned he had terminal cancer. We talked about old times and a number of friends and I finally said, **"Ken, in light of what the doctors have told you, and in light of the fact that you know you're going to die soon, I wonder if we might talk a bit about your soul."** I don't think I'll ever forget how he responded. He smiled and said, **"Absolutely. You know I love you Tom but the way things are I didn't call you here to talk about the weather."**

We went on to have a wonderful conversation about the gospel and the beauty of Christ and how he was trusting in Christ for his salvation and how he wanted his funeral to be a reflection of his faith in Jesus.

I guess it is just those kinds of experiences that have always caused me to be interested in the last thing a Christian says or writes before they die. But we don't pay much attention to that kind of thing much anymore...mainly I think because modern medicine tends to medicate dying folk into a state of oblivion. I think that is because modern people prefer not to watch others suffer. That's something I can understand. But in doing that we sometimes dull the senses of a person about to die to the extent that they are unable to say all that they might say or all they want to say. Fortunately, it hasn't always been that way.

I say that because our passage for the morning is the last word we have from the Apostle Paul. It may not be the last thing he ever wrote and it is almost certainly not the last thing he ever said, but it is the last thing the Spirit of God has chosen to preserve. That makes it especially important.

At the time Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy, he had been a minister of the gospel for somewhere around thirty years. He had preached the cross of Christ across Europe and Asia Minor and had laid a careful foundation of local churches that insured not only that the gospel would survive but that it would blossom and grow into a worldwide kingdom. When Paul wrote 2 Timothy he was, of course, already under arrest in Rome. And Paul had, I think, a pretty clear understanding that this time he would never make out of the prison alive. I think Paul knew intuitively that he might not live more than another month or two when he wrote his letter to Timothy. I'll explain how we know that next

week. Church tradition tells us that Paul was beheaded on the Ostian Way by order of the Emperor Nero himself.

Anyway, that's why 2 Timothy is so priceless.

It is Paul's swan song. In it, Paul wrote to Timothy knowing that he didn't have much longer to live. And knowing that he didn't have much longer to live, Paul wanted to give Timothy very specific instructions concerning the best use of both his time and his gifts. Of course what Paul told Timothy had direct application for Timothy alone. But there is a secondary sense in which Paul's message is applicable to every man that takes up the task of preaching God's Word. And beyond that there is even a sense in which Paul's words to Timothy have application for the life and ministry of every single New Testament Christian and church in the world. And because that's true, Paul's words have genuine relevance for us this morning. That's why I want to summarize Paul's message here in 2nd Timothy 4:1-8 in a way that might make it meaningful for us here at Grace Community this morning. So let me summarize Paul's message to Timothy this way:

Each new generation of believers is responsible to take up the proclamation of God's Word even as the church at large rejects that word and pursues its own uncrucified lust for novelty, frivolity, and wickedness, and each new generation is especially obligated to do that as the preceding generation of faithful proclaimers of the Word pass off the scene and into the presence of God.

Now what I want to do in the remaining time we have together is to simply work our way through the text and show you how the way I've summarized the text is accurately reflects what the text actually says.

Let's start by looking at 2nd Timothy 4:1.

^{ESV} **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: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

Paul's word to Timothy here in these first two verses of chapter four take the form of a legal charge. In it, Paul is calling both God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ to bear witness that he is turning over his ministry his younger protégé, Timothy. That's what he means when he says he is giving Timothy a charge in their presence. Of course, Paul wants Timothy to complete his ministry, to finish the task to which he has been assigned, so he further reminds Timothy that Christ Jesus, whom he has called as a witness to his charge to Timothy is the judge of both the living and the dead. You can imagine the measure of solemnity that must have added to Paul's words for young Timothy. Timothy's work as Paul's replacement will in the end be assessed by none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, the righteous judge himself. But Paul doesn't stop there. He reminds Timothy that Christ Jesus will soon be appearing and that when he does he will bring in his kingdom in a full and final way. When that happens, of course, all things will be ultimately and finally assessed according to their true worth or value.

Now at the beginning of verse two Paul gives the content or central point of his charge to Timothy. That charge is to, **“preach the word.”** The rest of verse two explains the manner in which Timothy is to do that. Notice he is to do so in season and out of season. He is to do so when it is convenient and people are willing to listen and he is to do so when it is inconvenient and people turn away. In preaching the word, Timothy is to preach the full counsel of God. He is to do so even when it means he has to correct believers...that’s what the word **“reprove”** means. He is to do so even when he has to rebuke believers...the Greek word translated **“rebuke”** in the ESV implies a sterner form of reproof. You see Timothy is to correct those doing wrong through his preaching and he is to do that in a way that covers both overlooked blind spots and willful, obstinate disobedience. He is to preach in such a way that his words run the gamut all the way from gentle correction to strong rebuke.

But Paul doesn’t want Timothy’s preaching only to be negative, far from it. He doesn’t want Timothy to neglect correcting his hearers when they need to be corrected, but he doesn’t want Timothy to forget to encourage them as well when they need it. His preaching must contain both law and gospel.

I can tell you from my own personal experience in the ministry that this is the hardest thing in the world to get right. A pastor has to stay in prayerful contact with his people and his elders and deacons have to help him rightly shape the nature and direction of his preaching. That is when the church as a whole is struggling with sin he needs to preach the law in all its fury. When the church on the other hand has been beaten down by the law and understands its sinful state, that same preacher needs to preach the gospel in all its sweetness. No man, regardless of how brilliant he is, is up to that kind of task apart from the Spirit of

God. In fact, Martin Luther used to say, **“If a man has a proper discernment for when to preach the law and when to preach the gospel go ahead and give him his doctor’s cap.”**

And then of top of everything else, Paul commands Timothy to do all that he is to do with complete patience and teaching. I think it most likely that the Paul intends the complete patience and teaching to refer to the manner in which Paul reproveth, rebukes and encourages. But it may be bigger than that including both the preaching of the Word and the being ready in season and out of season as well.

Now the real question is, **“Why is Paul so concerned that Timothy faithfully fulfill his responsibility to preach the word?”**

Paul gives two reasons. The first occurs in verse 3 and the second one occurs in verse 6. You can tell verse 3 is going to be one the reasons why Paul wants Timothy to preach the word because of that little word **“for”** at the beginning of the verse. It is the translation of the Greek conjunction **“γὰρ.”** Most of the time when it occurs in the text, it needs to be understood as something like **“the reason you need to do this is because.”**

Now before we look in detail at verse three, you ought to notice the word **“for”** is used again down at the beginning of verse six. It is also the word **“γὰρ”** in Greek and it too ought to be understood as one of the reasons why Paul wants Timothy to preach the word. My point is that Paul first gives Timothy a charge **“to preach”** the Word, and then follows that charge up with two important reasons why he ought to do so.

Did you get that? Paul gives Timothy a solemn charge to preach the Word, and then follows up that charge up with two reasons as to why Timothy ought to preach the Word.

Now look with me at verse 3 for Paul's first reason why Timothy needs to brace himself to **"preach the Word."**

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 4:3**...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, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

You can see that Paul's first reason why Timothy needs to brace himself to preach the Word is because people's hearts are prone to wander.

That reminds me of that wonderfully insightful line from the hymn *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, where it says:

*O to grace how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here's my heart, O take and seal it,
seal it for thy courts above.*

Paul says to Timothy that a time is coming in which people will just want to wander off. They will no longer endure sound or healthy teaching...focusing on the great redemptive work of Christ and its implications...but will instead crave novelty and that which appeals to their own interests or passions. Like a dog

wanting its belly continually scratched, they will want their speculations scratched and the result will be that they will ever be turning away from the pure milk of the Word and ever turning unto the intoxicating lure of the latest fad. People's hearts will long to turn away from the faith once delivered to the saints unto the church of what's happening now.

And you know I think that that is so obviously the state of the modern evangelical church today that I really don't even need to illustrate the point. I mean in the past there have always been those who wanted to innovate. There have always been those who wanted to mess with the historic doctrines of the faith and to transform them into something a little more soothing to itching ears. But today, doctrine has more or less been jettisoned altogether and the church has become a laboratory of experimental innovation for the sake of innovation. Preaching has been replaced by a monologue or by a skit or a play or by spiritual dance. There is so much innovation that some preachers have discarded their pulpits altogether and rolled out in their place stools or in some cases pillow top king sized beds. They have discarded their black robes reflecting the solemnity of their charge and have instead put on silk pajamas covered with superheroes. Ministers have as C.S. Lewis once put it, **"Stopped feeding my sheep and instead starting teaching my dogs new tricks."**

But Paul wants Timothy to resist that urge. He wants him instead to preach the Word, to patiently and faithfully proclaim the whole counsel of the God. You can see Paul's desire for Timothy in verse 5.

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 4:5**...As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

Paul calls Timothy to take preaching and ministry seriously. He calls him to work hard at his preaching. He calls him to endure suffering and that suffering is almost certainly connected here in the context to his faithful preaching of the Word. He is to faithfully proclaim the Word of God calling sinners to repentance. He is to fulfill or complete or finish his ministry. Paul is by implication telling Timothy to forget novelty, to forget innovation, to forget trying to please those who want their ears scratched and to remember that Jesus Himself will be the judge of what is acceptable, what is true, what is best.

He is reminding Timothy of the same truth James Denny would describe some eighteen centuries later when he said, **“No man can at the same time show himself to be clever and Jesus as mighty to save.”**

Now having explained to Timothy that he wants brace himself to preach the Word in light of the fact that men and women in the church will be apt to wander away from the truth, Paul gives Timothy a second and final reason why he needs to brace himself to preach the gospel.

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 4:6**...For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

Now you ought not to be able to read this verse without feeling a tremendous wave of emotion. You see Paul is saying that he is like the wine libation poured out on the altar. He is saying he is just about emptied out... just about done. That's what he means when he says the **“time of my departure has come.”**

You see Paul's second reason why Timothy should preach the Word is that Paul needs him to take his place because he simply will not be around anymore. You see Paul's point to Timothy is that... **Each new generation of believers is responsible to take up the proclamation of God's Word even as the church at large rejects that word and pursues its own uncrucified lust for novelty, frivolity, and wickedness, and each new generation is especially obligated to do that as the preceding generation of faithful proclaimers of the Word pass off the scene and into the presence of God.**

Paul ends his thought with these marvelous last words:

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 4:7**...I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ 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.

Paul's implication is that he has left the church in good shape through the faithful proclamation of the Word. He has faithfully discharged all that he was given to do by the Lord Jesus and is now willing to turn over his charge to the Timothy and the next generation after that.

But in his word to Timothy there is also an implied warning that the Lord Jesus, the righteous judge himself, will be ever aware of how Timothy is fulfilling his charge. Paul longs for Timothy to be faithful to his charge so that in that day he will stand with Paul and the myriads of other just men and women made perfect and that he will do so as one who loves his appearing and is unashamed.

About twelve years ago, I was invited to North Africa to speak to a group of Bible translators. I had about six months warning and I prepared as hard as I could. I thought and prayed and asked God to impress my spirit with what he wanted me to proclaim to them. In the end I decided that I wanted to speak to the battle-weary translators about the beauty of the gospel, and so I decided to address for them the issue of the doctrine of justification and its importance for the work we do.

The night before I was to speak to the translators the regional director for this Bible translation organization, the regional director of Northwest Africa, came and visited me in my room. We had a wonderful initial conversation, and near the end of the conversation he asked me, **“And Brother Tom, what is it you’re going to speak on over the next week?”**

I said, **“You know brother, I’ve prayed, and thought, and worked as hard as I could on my messages, and I’ve decided I’m going to speak on the wonder of the doctrine of justification.”**

I will never forget as long as I live the look of horror that came over his face. It was as if I said something filthy to him.

He looked at me with such shock and such disgust and he said, **“You’re kidding right?”**

I said, **“No I’m not kidding at all.”**

And he said, **“You think that’s what they need?”**

And I said, **“Yes, I do.”**

He said, **“You’ve got to be kidding. These people have been deprived of fellowship and friendship. They’ve suffered for the kingdom of Christ and you want to talk to them about some theological topic like justification. How can you do that?”**

And then he said to me, **“I plead with you brother, reconsider. Please don’t speak on that.”**

I was heartbroken. I had worked for six months to get ready for this event. I had travelled ten thousand miles to get to Africa. I was prepared, I thought, spiritually and mentally as best I could be. I prayed for two or three hours that night. I cried; I wept. In the end I decided I was going to preach on the doctrine of justification, only I wasn’t going to use the word **“justification”**.

The next day I spoke on the beauty of having Christ’s righteousness cover us over like a pure white garment. I cannot tell you how these battle-weary translators of the Bible wept...how they rejoiced in the gospel and the imputed righteousness of Christ.

There was this one old brother named Malcolm...he was from Ireland...I’ll never forget him as long as I live. He was about six foot tall and weighed about a hundred and thirty pounds.

He said to me, **“Thank you Tom. Thank you for telling us once again the old, old story. Thank you for proclaiming the Word of God in all its glory. I was in**

the Philippines for twenty or twenty-five years and then the organization decided to move me here to Niger and when I got here I got a brain parasite and you can see I've wasted down to almost nothing. I don't know how much longer I have but it gives me great joy and great consolation to hear the gospel that I have proclaimed myself and that I have sought to proclaim in the translation of God's Word. Thank you brother. Thank you once again for the old, old story."

Brothers and sisters, that is my prayer for us at Grace Community. Let us never forget that our central charge is to preach the Word even though the world doesn't want to hear it, let us do that into the next generation. Let us do that to the glory of God and to the advancement of Christ's kingdom.

Let's pray.

¹ Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), 508.