

"SPIRITUAL JUNK FOOD"  
2 Timothy 4:1-22  
October 23, 2022  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
Pasor Christy Waltersdorff

We have another letter from the Apostle Paul to his young protégé, Timothy, to read this morning. (Open envelope)

**2 Timothy 4:1-22 (The Message)**

*I can't impress this on you too strongly. God is looking over your shoulder. Christ himself is the Judge, with the final say on everyone, living and dead. Christ is about to break into the open with his rule, so proclaim the Message with intensity; keep on your watch. Challenge, warn, and urge your people. Don't ever quit. Just keep it simple.*

*You're going to find that there will be times when people will have no stomach for solid teaching, but will fill up on spiritual junk food—catchy opinions that tickle their fancy. They'll turn their backs on truth and chase mirages. But you—keep your eye on what you're doing; accept the hard times along with the good; keep the Message alive; do a thorough job as God's servant.*

*You take over. I'm about to die, my life an offering on God's altar. This is the only race worth running. I've run hard right to the finish, believed all the way. All that's left now is the shouting—God's applause! Depend on it, God's an honest judge. God will do right not only by me, but by everyone eager for Christ's coming.*

*Timothy, get here as fast as you can. Demas, chasing fads, went off to Thessalonica and left me here. Crescens is in Galatia province, Titus in Dalmatia. Luke is the only one here with me. Bring Mark with you; he'll be my right-hand man since I'm sending Tychicus to Ephesus. Bring the winter coat I left in Troas with Carpus; also the books and parchment notebooks.*

*Watch out for Alexander the coppersmith. Fiercely opposed to our Message, he caused no end of trouble. God will give him what he's got coming.*

*At my preliminary hearing no one stood by me. They all ran like scared rabbits. But it doesn't matter—God stood by me and helped me spread the Message loud and clear to those who had never heard it. I was snatched from the jaws of the lion! God's looking after me, keeping me safe in the kingdom of heaven. All praise to God, praise forever! Oh, yes!*

*Say hello to Priscilla and Aquila; also, the family of Onesiphorus. Erastus stayed behind in Corinth. I had to leave Trophimus sick in Miletus.*

*Try hard to get here before winter.*

*Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia, and all your friends here send greetings.*

*God be with you. Grace be with you.*

*With love to you in the name of the living Christ,*

*Your father in the faith, Paul*

---

Wow! That is quite a letter. So much is happening here it is hard to know where to begin. Remember that Paul is writing this letter from a prison cell in Rome. He has already had one trial another is in the near future. Paul has been disappointed in people he thought were faithful Christians but have turned their backs on his solid teaching. The NRSV version of the Bible says it this way- *"For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths."* (vv 3-4)

The Message says those people prefer to fill up on spiritual junk food and catchy opinions that tickle their fancy. Maybe some of us have been tempted to fill up on spiritual junk food - you know what I mean, the kind of teaching that promises if we are good and faithful God will reward us with material blessings and nothing bad will ever happen to us. That kind of Christianity is certainly more attractive than following Paul into a prison cell.

But Paul reminds Timothy that it isn't the truth. It isn't the gospel he has given his life to proclaim. And then he speaks the truth that Timothy probably doesn't want to hear. "You take over. I'm about to die."

Paul's letters to Timothy are his end-of-life reflections. We have gotten to know Paul through his scriptural presence- first as a fierce persecutor of the Jesus followers and then as a fierce advocate of the Risen Christ. Paul traveled throughout the Mediterranean, surviving shipwrecks and violent crowds, starting new church communities as he worked as a tentmaker to pay his bills. Now he sits alone in a prison cell, having survived beatings and torture, knowing that he will sooner rather than later meet a violent end. He simultaneously complains of rejection while celebrating his great run.

Paul is looking back over thirty years of struggle, risk, and joyful obedience to God. He knows that he gave his all. He did what he was called to do. And he gives God all the credit for what he has achieved. He believes that victory awaits him beyond death.

Paul tells Timothy to have courage even the face of pain and suffering because God is always with him. Paul knows what he has faced in his own life as an Apostle of Christ, and he knows that Timothy will not have an easy time of it either. He is brutally honest with the younger man, not to scare him away from a life of ministry, but to prepare him for the realities of that life. Paul is completing this marathon set before him by God. He has a lot he wants to say and not a lot of time left to say it.

The beauty of this letter is that Paul understands his life story within the larger framework of his trust in God who overcomes evil. His death will not be the end. He writes with confidence, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now it is your turn, Timothy."

There is a lot of deep and profound theology in this short letter, but my favorite part begins with verse 9 where Paul begins to share some delightfully mundane and personal comments. "Get here as fast as you can. Bring my coat and don't forget the notebooks." This part of the letter captures what, I believe, is the most important part of a life of faith- relationships that carry us through every minute of our lives. These comments give us a view of Paul in a moment of vulnerable humanity.

It is easy to forget that many of the people we read about in scripture were real people. The context of their lives is important to understanding their relationship with God and with Jesus. We sometimes gloss over the scant personal information we find in scripture but that is sometimes the most important information of all.

Maybe we think of Paul as a super disciple of Jesus- unafraid of anyone or anything. But this letter tells us that he was hurt by the rejection of some that he called friends. He has anger and resentment against some people.

He is lonely in his prison cell, and he is cold too. We can learn a lot by paying attention to these last few verses. These brief notes give us a glimpse into the intimate, personal relationship between two friends. They know the same people. They have experienced some of the same things. They have a history together as good friends do.

*"Get here as fast as you can."* Paul writes with a sense of urgency because he knows it will take 3-4 months for his letter to reach Timothy in Ephesus, then for Timothy to make plans for a trip to Rome, and then finally showing up at Paul's cell.

*"Demas, chasing fads, went off to Thessalonica."* Someone Paul thought he could count on abandoned him, chasing spiritual junk food in another town. Demas was a faithful colleague, until he wasn't.

Two others, Crescens and Titus are in other towns- since Paul doesn't write anything negative about them, we can assume they are properly going about their ministry.

Paul is quite clear that Luke is the only one who is with him in Rome. He requests that Timothy bring Mark along. Although Mark once let Paul down, he is apparently back in Paul's good graces because Paul says Mark will be his right- hand man.

I don't know why verse 13 delights me so much, *"Bring the winter coat I left in Troas with Carpus; and also the books and the parchment notebooks."* This verse shows Paul's humanity most clearly. He knew it was going to get cold and he wanted that coat. Perhaps he needed the books for spiritual nourishment. Some believe the parchment notebooks could have been the Hebrew scriptures, what we know as the Old Testament. Or perhaps they were a collection of the stories and sayings of Jesus himself. Whatever they contained, they were important to Paul, and he wanted them.

And then a word of warning, *"Watch out for Alexander the coppersmith. (That is quite specific.) Fiercely opposed to our Message, he caused no end of trouble."* And then Paul adds a zinger, *"God will give him what he's got coming."* Tell us how you really feel, Paul.

Paul writes about his first trial- *"At my preliminary hearing no one stood by me. They all ran like scared rabbits. But it doesn't matter- the master stood by me and helped me spread the Message loud and clear to those who had never heard it. I was snatched from the jaws of the lion! God is looking after me, keeping me safe in the kingdom of heaven. All praise to God, forever!"*

These comments all focus on relationships, don't they? He lists who has stood by him and who has deserted him. They are obviously people Timothy knew and had a relationship with as well.

Some folks might just skip past the final few verses- but they hold a great deal of important information. *"Say hello to Priscilla and Aquila, also the family of Onesiphorus. Erastus stayed behind in Corinth. I had to leave Trophimus sick in Miletus."*

We find Priscilla and Aquila in Paul's letter to the Romans (16:3-4). *"Greet Priscilla and Aquila, who work with us in Christ, and who risked their necks for my life."* They put themselves on the line for Paul and he never forgot. This couple had nurtured house churches everywhere they went. The book of Acts tells us that Paul lived and worked with them as tentmakers in Corinth and they were with him in Ephesus and then in Rome, where

the church met in their house. They had returned to Ephesus where they received Paul's final farewell.

In his commentary on Second Timothy, Thomas Oden writes, "*What is striking about this greeting is that the name of the woman is mentioned before the man, contrary to custom in antiquity.*" Apparently, this was a great honor.

One early theologian wrote, "*He names the woman first, as being I suppose more zealous, and more faithful.*" Of the six times Paul writes of this couple, he lists Priscilla first four times. (1)

Trophimus, who was ill, had a big part in a story about the persecution of Paul in the book of Acts. Apparently, while they were in Jerusalem some of the Jews accused Paul of taking Trophimus into the temple. The problem was that he was from Ephesus, a Greek gentile, a non-Jew, and not allowed in the temple. His mere presence would defile the holy place. Paul was accused, a mob grabbed him and began beating him, trying to kill him. They finally stopped when soldiers arrived and arrested him. The story goes on from there, but you can read it for yourself in Acts 21.

Paul asks Timothy to try to get there before winter. Paul knew it was much more difficult to travel in wintertime. He knew that Timothy would have to leave Ephesus by summer to get to Rome before the cold weather set in.

And Paul wanted that darn coat!

There is one more line of greetings to Timothy from Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia, and all of his friends there. Linus is believed to have been the second Bishop of the Church of Rome, after Peter. So basically, he was the Pope. One early tradition named Claudia as his mother.

Paul ends this letter with these words: "*God be with you. Grace be with you.*"

What more is there to say? Paul had his second trial and was sentenced to death by execution. He was taken outside of the city and beheaded.

I don't know if Timothy got there in time. I hope he did.

Because that's what friends are for.

Amen.

End Notes:

- INTERPRETATION SERIES- FIRST AND SECOND TIMOTHY AND TITUS, Thomas C. Oden, Westminster John Knox. 1989. P. 183.