

“Ministry: Retrospect and Reality”

2 Timothy 1:1-7 (NRSV)

Tough times had fallen on **the apostle Paul** since the writing of his first letter to Timothy. When he'd first written, he was on the road, hoping to visit him in Ephesus (1 Tim. 3:14). Now he's chained in prison (2 Tim. 1:16-17; 2:9). Many think, as tradition suggests, it was the Mamertine prison in Rome, still open to view. If so, it was a dismal underground chamber with a single hole in the ceiling for light and air. Paul had already had a court hearing (which he alludes to in 4:16-18), and he expects he will soon be executed (4:6-8).

He was lonely. His faithful missionary companion, **Luke**, the physician, was the only one with him. A former helper, **Demas** (Col. 4:14; Phm. 24) had abandoned him because he was “in love with this present world” (4:10a). Another, **Crescens** had gone to Galatia in Asia Minor or, as some translate it, to Gaul (present-day France), and **Titus**, a devoted Greek disciple and close “brother” in the Lord (2 Cor. 2:13), who was like his “own son” (Tit. 1:4), was off to Dalmatia (4:10b-11). At the same time things had deteriorated in Ephesus where Timothy was pastoring. Not only were there desertions, but **Hymenaeus**, whom he'd earlier excommunicated, was still doing his evil work (1 Tim. 1:18-20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18). Cold and alone, Paul would conclude this final letter by requesting that **Timothy** would come quickly, and that he might bring **John Mark** and a warm cloak and the apostle's parchments (4:9-13). It isn't known whether Timothy and Mark ever reached Paul before his execution.

Rembrandt has imagined and painted a wonderful painting of something like this moment now found in the Stuttgart State Gallery, Germany. Paul is visibly aged; his face is lined with weariness and his bloodshot eyes show a certain amount of apprehension. He sits on the edge of his bed, pen in hand; incongruously for prison, his sword, as well as some books are beside him; and he stares uncertainly out in space as he thinks of the tremendous things he's experienced and tries to think of the final words he will write.

As you might expect these were also tough times for **Timothy**. However much the teachings of Paul's first letter had been applied by the young man, the church at Ephesus was still under siege by false teachers. And now, with Paul's approaching passing, even heavier burdens were about to fall upon the shoulders of his young protégé.

You can understand why there are **marked differences** between Paul's first and second letter to Timothy. The first was written in the thick of missionary activity, with the inevitable good and bad reactions to learning God's new way of life in mind. The first letter is a kind of church manual as to "how people are to behave in the household of God" (1 Tim. 3:15b). The second letter was written at the end of Paul's own ministry and mission. He is aware he is passing the torch to a younger generation, so the letter focuses almost exclusively on Timothy. Paul's writing here is intensely personal. There is also an elegiac tone to it. It is Paul's last will and testament, "written, as **John Calvin** has said, "not merely in ink but in Paul's own lifeblood." Passion and urgency ooze from Paul's pen as he addresses Timothy. The purpose of the letter is to charge him to persevere in the ministry of the gospel – to fill the aged apostle's immense gospel sandals.

Let's begin with **the greeting** (1:1-2). As intensely **personal** as this letter is, Paul also intended this letter to be read by the church in Ephesus – understanding the challenges of Christian ministry to be a team effort. Further, knowing the needs of successive generations of Christians, I'm sure he also intended it for the church **universal**. If Paul was writing for Timothy alone, he would never have begun with such a formal and lofty assertion of his apostleship: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise that is in Christ Jesus" (1:1). People were always questioning Paul's apostleship. **How had he become an apostle?** His authority – as any Christian minister's authority – although sanctioned by others, came directly from God. **Why had he been made an apostle?** To proclaim the promises of the gospel of Jesus to others. He was to introduce people to the possibilities of new life in Christ Jesus.

Moving from this lofty universal greeting, Paul switches in verse 2 to the **intimate language of love**: "To Timothy, my beloved child" (1:2a). The cold and lonely old apostle was warmed by the thought of his beloved young disciple and so he sent a triple blessing to him, praying fervently for him: "Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (1:2b). It was "**grace**" for the undeserving, "**mercy**" for the helpless and "**peace**" for the restless. How soothing these words must have been to Timothy's heart and mind and soul!

After this, Paul moves to **a heartening personal retrospective** about himself, and then about Timothy, and then he gives him **a charge** based upon bracing spiritual truths. It's encouraging, enabling stuff for us as well.

1. **Retrospective – looking back on his own life** (2 Tim. 1:3).

Looking back over his long years of ministry, Paul possessed the happy retrospective of **“a clear conscience”** (1:3a). That hadn't always been the case. Before coming to know Christ, his conscience had repeatedly accused him and slain him, as the seventh chapter of his letter to the Romans so dramatically chronicles. But when he encountered Christ, his heart was suffused with the love of Jesus and the benefits of his sacrifice upon the cross, and he was cleansed from **“an evil [or guilty, NIV] conscience”** (Heb. 10:22).

This is invaluable instructive! Any of us who may have been troubled by a guilty or a confused conscience know there is something bracing about living with **“a clear conscience.”** Some people have a clear conscience because they have a fuzzy memory. Other people just don't want to do what their consciences advise. A man consulted a psychiatrist and complained, **“I've been misbehaving, Doc, and my conscience is troubling me.”** The doctor asked, **“And you want to do something that will strengthen your willpower?”** The fellow replied, **“Well, no, I was thinking of something that would weaken my conscience.”** Paul had a clear and an active conscience.

The old warrior may be chained in a dripping, winter-cold dungeon, awaiting the executioner's axe, but as he surveys his life – as he considers his conversion and the kaleidoscope of sermons he's preached, as well as the range of **“afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger”** (2 Cor. 6:4b-6a), shipwrecks, confrontations, which he has suffered and the deliverances, and victories which he has won – his conscience is absolutely clear. There is no guilt, no weight of unresolved sins, nothing to confess, nothing to make right. He has been true to the gospel and to his calling. He was not sinless but blameless, and he was faithful. Paul can be satisfied he did his best.

Moreover, as he sat in prison, Paul writes to Timothy, **“I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day”** (1:3c). Of course, Paul would not have been in prayer literally every minute of every day – he had many other things on his mind – but, no doubt, Timothy and the perils and

potential pitfalls of his ministry were constantly running through his mind as well and as they did Paul would “constantly” commit them to the Lord.

That’s a great way to pray. When someone or something important comes to your mind commit it to God.

2. **Retrospective – looking back on Timothy’s life** (2 Tim. 1:4-5).

Now the apostle turns his thoughts in reflection to Timothy’s life. His retrospective brims with emotion: “Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy” (1:4).

Acts tells us when Paul said farewell to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, the whole company shed tears (20:7), but that event took place years before. Therefore, **Timothy’s “tears”** here must refer to something more recent. Maybe Timothy shed tears over his beleaguered church. More likely, it was a tearful goodbye to Paul as he was carried off to Rome. The memory of Timothy’s faithful, tearful love must have made the old apostle’s heart ache for Timothy’s presence. It also makes Paul’s later poignant plea, “Do your best to come before winter” (4:1) even more haunting.

It must be remembered here that **Timothy** was not at all like Paul. He was still **young** and, to a large extent, still **relatively inexperienced**. In his first letter, Paul had told the disciple to allow no one to look down on his youth (4:12). And in this letter Timothy is told to “Shun youthful passions ...” (2:22). Further, Timothy had **a weak constitution**. He had “frequent ailments,” including a frequently upset stomach (1 Tim. 5:3). He was timid. He was naturally **shy** – what we today would call an introvert (1:7). On one occasion Paul had had to write the Corinthian Christians, “If Timothy comes, see to it he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying out the work of the Lord, just as I am. No one, then, should refuse to accept him” (1 Cor. 16:10-11a, NIV). Apparently, Timothy had lots of anxieties and fears.

By contrast, **Paul was seasoned and mature**, as well as being **constitutionally tough and lionhearted**; he was not young, and weak and shy like Timothy. Yet, not only did Paul love Timothy, he believed in him, and he thanked God for him (1:3a). Why? Because he knew God had made him who he was, and because he knew God was at work in Timothy making him more than adequate for his ministry.

If you sense God is calling you to do something beyond your natural capabilities, you can take heart from Timothy's life.

I'll never forget **a young dentist** in my first congregation of St. Giles, in Prince George, who figured he was too tongue-tied to ever be able to speak about his faith to others. But he tried it and found that he could be eloquent beyond words. He later became an elder and a leader in the congregation. And I have heard that since moving down south to Sydney, BC, on the Island, he continues to be an effective witness for Christ.

In Paul's brief retrospective look back at Timothy's life, he also remembered Timothy's "**sincere faith**": "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you" (1:5). Although Timothy's father was an unbelieving Gentile (Acts 16:1b), his grandmother and mother were believing Jews who had come to faith in Christ in fulfillment of their Jewish heritage, experiencing the profound continuity of the old and the new covenants. The result was a deep and "a sincere faith."

Timothy's folks' faith was genuine. It penetrated their hearts and wills and lives, so that everything was touched by it – their fears and hopes and loves and desires and joys and compassion and zeal. They were the genuine article. Much like good crystal, their lives had "the ring of truth" about it (title of a book by J. B. Phillips). Such **faith came to characterize Timothy** as well. This was not just a case of eugenics, good genes, and good breeding. Rather, after Timothy had seen "the real thing" in them, he too came to Christ, and his life began to show the same genuine response and effect. His heart was in it. His faith and life were totally sincere.

In spite of all the other drawbacks in his life, there was no doubt in Paul's mind about Timothy's "sincere faith." He might be young, he might be weak, he might be shy, but his faith and life were genuine. The transcending point is that Paul trusted in Timothy's faith and he trusted in Timothy. Remember this and never forget it. **The effect of godly people who believe in us is beyond accounting.** Timothy was called to stand tall by the heartening recollection of Paul. He was his boy; he was his man!

3. **Reality – what lay ahead** (2 Tim. 1:6-7).

The soil of Timothy's life, watered by such love and faith, was ready to be planted with Paul's appeal: "For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of hands ..." (1:6).

At first reading it might appear "**the gift of God**" that Timothy needs "to rekindle" or "to fan into flame" (NIV) is **some special giftedness** for ministry that he might have received at his ordination (1Tim. 4:14). This may be correct as far as it goes. But the next verse makes it clear Paul wants Timothy to fan "the gift of God" by relying more and more on **God's Holy Spirit** whom he'd already received at his conversion or confirmation: "... for," adds Paul, "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (1:7).

Gordon Fee is surely correct in establishing that the "**spirit**" in verse 7 should have a capital "**S**" because it refers to work of **the Holy Spirit** (p. 226, 227). When people become believers God puts his Holy Spirit to work in their spirits. **Martin Luther** celebrated this truth in the life of the believer when he wrote in his famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God" that "**the Spirit and the gifts are ours.**"

Of course, there's no doubt God's Holy Spirit is already at work in believers and unbelievers alike, even prior to conversion. Jesus himself said it is God's Holy Spirit, "the Spirit of truth" (Jn. 14:17a) that "will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment" (Jn. 16:8-11). It is God's Holy Spirit that ultimately convicts and converts anyone. But when that has happened, as the believer willingly, prayerfully opens himself or herself up more and more to the work of God's Holy Spirit, greater and greater things can be accomplished.

It was Paul's prayer that as Timothy agreed to "rekindle the gift of God" that had been given to him earlier, the Holy Spirit would make him sufficient to face whatever challenge lay ahead. If Timothy would only ask God for more and more of his help, Paul was convinced God would give him **greater and greater confidence, affirmation and willpower.**

Thus, instead of giving in to his own natural inclination to cowardliness, Timothy would find the Holy Spirit would breathe “**power**” into his weakness. Instead of stewing in his own natural feelings of insecurity, the Holy Spirit would breathe a deep “**love**” for himself and for others into his whole being. Instead of acquiescing to his tendency to run away from the battle, the Holy Spirit would put steel into Timothy’s soul and gumption into his will. Paul wanted him to gain “**self-discipline,**” self-mastery, “the sanity of saintliness” (Barclay, 1966, p. 166).

The **specific command** to Timothy is in verse 6: “For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you ...” (1:6a). The giftedness was there, but **there was a need for more fire**. Timothy was urged to **fan his gift to full flame**. He was young and weak and timid, but he was called to stand tall, and he could because Paul believed in him and the Spirit would enable him. There was special application in this command to Timothy, yet **the principle applies to all Christians**, because every Christian has received ministry gifts and the same Spirit. We must all exercise our gifts or we will lose them. **An untended fire becomes ashes**. But when we fan the fire and step out to serve (no matter how inadequate we feel), we can expect the Spirit’s power and love and level headed self-control to be in us. Perhaps you have felt those strange and sometimes terrifying inner butterflies that come when God is calling you to step out to serve him. But do it – “fan into flame the gift” – and do the work God asks of you because he’s already given you the power and the love and the self-discipline to do it.

Amen

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