

## “Tough Friends For Tough Times”

2 Timothy 4:9-15 (NRSV)

It was **C. S. Lewis**, the great twentieth century Oxford English literature professor, who had a great need for friendship and who formed some of the greatest friendships in a group called “the Inklings,” who said that a person requires **two types of friends**.

The First is the *alter ego*, the [one] who first reveals to you that you are not alone in the world by turning out (beyond hope) to share all your most secret delights. There is nothing to be overcome in making him your friend; he and you join like raindrops on a window. But the Second Friend is the one who disagrees with you about everything. He is not so much the *alter ego* as the antiself. Of course he shares your interests; otherwise he would not become your friend at all. But he has approached them all at a different angle. He has read all the right books but has got the wrong thing out of every one. It is as if he spoke your language but mispronounced it. How can he be so nearly right and yet, invariably, just not right? .... When you set out to correct his heresies, you find that he forsooth has decided to correct yours! And then you go at it, hammer and tongs, far into the night, night after night, or walking through fine country that neither gives a glance to, each learning the weight of the other’s punches and often more like mutually respectful enemies than friends. Actually (though it never seems so at the time) you modify one another’s thought; out of this perpetual dogfight a community of mind and a deep affection emerge (Surprised By Joy, 1955 UK, 1956 US, p. 199-200).

The apostle Paul also understood the importance of friends – and especially the importance of **tough friends through tough times**. Years earlier when he was ministering in Macedonia, he became so exhausted by external conflicts and inner fears about the work and about the relentless fact that his body had no rest that he became “**downcast**” or “**depressed**” as the NASB translates it. **Times were tough**, and his discouragement was substantial. “But,” he writes, “God, who consoles the downcast, consoled us by the arrival of Titus” (2 Cor. 7:6). It wasn’t things that brought him comfort. It was the touch and the encouragement of **a trusted friend**. And the effect was priceless. Titus relayed the affirmation of other friends, and so Paul was able to write, further, “so that I rejoiced still more” (2 Cor. 7:7b). There is **something wonderful about having some friends**.

There is also **something terrible about having no friends**.

Here in his second letter to Timothy, Paul has already praised **the Titus-like ministry** done for him by **Onesiphorus** (2 Tim. 1:16-18). After Paul's arrest, **most believers** in the Roman province of Asia, where Ephesus was located, **had deserted him**, including leaders like Phygelus and Hermogenes (1:15). But excellent Onesiphorus had travelled to Rome and searched high and low for Paul – treading the back alleys, knocking on doors, asking questions – until he found him. **“He often refreshed me”** (1:16). Despite the danger, Onesiphorus returned again and again to Paul's dungeon and ministered to him. Onesiphorus was there for Paul when neither the sun nor the moon shone on his friend.

Mind you, in the mud of the dungeon, there was no evidence Paul was depressed. On the contrary, the preceding paragraph is a triumphant declaration that as he looked through the bars of his cell, he saw the stars. Nevertheless, **this was a tough time for Paul**, perhaps his toughest. He knew that “tough times never last but tough people do” (**Robert Schuller**); he knew the value of all-weather friends. So, at the end, the old apostle rallies his relationships. He becomes intensely directive and he sends out four last orders.

1. **“Come immediately ...”** (2 Tim. 4:9-11a).

The first directive was that Timothy should drop everything in Ephesus and **come immediately to be with him in Rome**. “Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me” (2 Tim. 4:9-11a). Paul's motivations were several.

Overarching was his father-son love for Timothy. Paul began this letter by calling him **“my beloved child”** (1:2), followed by an emotional retrospect: “Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy” (1:4). The memory of Timothy's tearful love must have made the old apostle's heart ache for his presence. Timothy was the son Paul never had. Timothy was Paul's soul-son.

Paul's insistence that Timothy come soon was demanding to say the least. The journey would take him four to six months over land and sea – mostly land – by way of Troas (1:13), Philippi -- following a great Roman road –

then across to Brundisium and on to Rome. Paul must have been counting on the slow, grinding pace of Roman justice to allow Timothy to beat the apostle's appointment with death. The journey would have to be made as quickly as possible despite its inherent dangers.

Some have criticized Paul for this, saying he was selfishly putting his own needs above that of the church, especially the troubled Ephesian church that Timothy was attempting to help. Obviously such critics neither understand **the depth of the relationship between the two**, nor the fact that Paul had **important truths and strategies to impart to Timothy** – which could only be communicated in the give and take of extended personal exchange. Paul's armchair critics fail to understand this event marks the end of the initial era of Christian mission, and that what Paul would impart would be essential to the health and wellbeing of the church universal. They also fail to note that as he mentions in a few sentences on, trusted **Tychicus was being sent by Paul to Ephesus (4:12)** -- probably with this letter in hand -- where he would serve as Timothy's replacement.

The critics also do not give enough weight to the depth of **Paul's isolation and the need for tough friends for tough times**, which is embedded right here in his own words – “for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica” (4:10a).

**Demas had splendid potential.** In his earlier letter to Philemon, Paul had honoured him by referring to him as a “**fellow worker**” along with the likes of Mark and Luke (24). He was **part of the inner circle**, in close communion with these other greats. Demas was **a man of spiritual substance**. Accordingly, in Paul's letter to the Colossians, he is included as one who “sends greetings” (4:14). Demas wasn't a lightweight, and he'd been with Paul in many ups and downs before. **But this time the situation in Rome was apparently too much for him.** Paul was no longer under house arrest; he was now in the formidable Mamartine prison under the sentence of death. So Demas packed his bags and left for Thessalonica.

There's **no suggestion here that Demas became a heretic or apostate.** The astute and careful commentator, **John Calvin**, writes:

But we are not to suppose that he completely denied Christ and gave himself over again to ungodliness or the allurements of the world, but only that he cared more for his own convenience and safety than for

the life of Paul. He could not stay with Paul without involving himself in many troubles and vexations and a real risk to his life; He was exposed to many reproaches, he was laid open to many insults, he was forced to give up caring for his own concerns, and in the circumstances he was overcome by his dislike for the cross and decided to look after his own interests.

Demas had **no intention of quitting his Christian faith**. In fact, there was a healthy group of Christians in Thessalonica, and that is where he went.

Paul's assessment that it was because he was **"in love with this present world"** (4:10a) does not make Demas a villain, but merely a man, so much like us, who came into disgrace by a well-worn path. **Demas did not want to lose his Christianity, but "it might hurt him to keep it"** (Guy H. King, To My Son – An Expository Study ..., 1944, p. 126). Love for "this present world," or "this present age" (NIV) – as the Greek literally reads – takes many shapes, depending upon who and where we are. It could be shaped as "comfort," or take the form of wealth, or come in the contours of fame or advantage, or the love of other specific things.

Perhaps Demas never truly counted the cost. The Second World War martyr, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** discovered that "when Christ calls a [person], he calls that [person] to die." It may be Demas did not understand that when we come to Christ, we will face troubles because we will always collide with the world. Or it may be, as **William Barclay** has suggested, "the years have a way of taking our ideals away, of making us satisfied with less and less, of lowering our standards.... There is no threat so dangerous and so insidious, as the threat of the years to a [person's] ideals" (p. 245-246). There is not a single soul that is not swayed by the lure of comfort. And the older we get, the more alluring the siren songs are.

**Demas' departure devastated Paul.** Your deepest hurts can only come from people you love, your deepest disappointments from the destruction of your deepest hopes. What a bitter pill this was for Paul. I can testify from years of ministry that the greatest heartaches have come from those who began so well, who raised my hopes high, only to become "lovers of this present world" rather than lovers of Christ and of his kingdom.

The mention of Demas reminded Paul of two other departures that no doubt had his blessing: **“Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia”** (4:10b). Both of these had gone out on mission trips. Dalmatia was across the Adriatic Sea, and Galatia across the Aegean. Titus was the one who had given Paul a healing touch in Macedonia and whom Paul came to call “my true son” (Titus 1:4). It was right and good that these two had gone out on their God-given way. But their absence, no doubt, heightened the apostle’s need for Timothy.

Thus some might read, **“Only Luke is with me”** (411a) as a disparaging aside. Yet that is not so because Luke was the antithesis of Demas. He, too, had been with Demas and Paul during his first imprisonment in Rome. He, too, was included in the greetings sent to the Colossians and was given the beautiful description, “the beloved physician” (Col. 4:14 RSV). But, **Luke was a tough friend for tough times**. He stuck with Paul from the first time of his house arrest to the last imprisonment. He was **Paul’s biographer** – the “we” passages in the Acts of the Apostles indicate that he was with the apostle during some of his most difficult days.

And, he was not only Paul’s Boswell, he was also **his traveling physician**. He tended Paul’s aching bones and doctored the “thorn in his flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7) – whatever that might have been. Some say it was bad eyesight. Some say it was malaria.

His cultured Greek style has given us not only the powerfully moving book of Acts, but also the most tender and theological of all the gospels -- which bears his name. Perhaps as Paul composed his own final epistle, he also found himself concerned for Luke who had to shoulder not only care for him and his affairs, but found his own time taken up with so many details he had difficulty in finding time to **write his own memorable books** while he was with Paul in Rome. Luke was also likely Paul’s secretary for the writing of Paul’s second letter to Timothy, so he probably penned the personal, self-effacing “only Luke is with me” with a wry smile.

Paul is so intensely directive here. Timothy must come running from Asia – an intercontinental sprint. His arrival will herald **the formation of a tough but small team of friends** gathering for the apostle’s final days on earth. Paul knows what he needs and he is not afraid to voice it.

## 2. “Get Mark, and bring him with you ...” (2 Tim. 4:11b-12).

Paul’s second directive to Timothy was to “Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is useful in my ministry” (4:11b).

Mark had been **a remarkably advantaged young man**. His mother’s home had been one of the centers of the Jerusalem church, the home to which Peter had come when the angel delivered him from prison (Acts 2:12). John Mark, for those were his given two names, **had known all the apostles since boyhood**. So when the new apostle on the block, Paul, embarked on his first missionary trip, John Mark had accompanied him as a helper (and maybe an observer?) on the campaign through Cyprus. But for some unknown reason he left Paul in Pamphylia and went home (Acts 13:5, 13). Paul had considered this nothing less than **desertion**. So, later, when Barnabas wanted to let John Mark accompany them on a subsequent journey, Paul would have none of it. The ensuing argument between Paul and Barnabas was so sharp that Paul took Silas and went one way, and Barnabas took John Mark and went the other (Acts 15:36-40).

We have no record of what happened to John Mark afterward, but evidently his time with Barnabas was **a time of healing** because we find that Mark – now also known by his single name – was again with Paul during his first imprisonment. (Col. 4:10). Paul lists him among the “fellow workers” he values (Philemon 24). And, significantly, Mark also became a veritable son to the aged apostle, Peter (1 Pe. 5:13). Now Paul, in his greatest need, calls for John Mark to return to him – because “he is useful in my ministry” – meaning the ministry of the gospel, though there is also the idea of personally useful to him. Clearly, John Mark had rocketed from uselessness to usefulness!

There is also this beautiful fact: **John Mark, the missionary dropout**, became **St. Mark, the writer of the first and greatest action gospel** that emphasizes the servanthood of our Lord. After all he’d been through, he was just the right man to do it! What encouragement we can find here. Past failure, even rejection, does not prevent useability. You and I can come back from disgrace. Not only that, you can become useful to Christ and to his servants. Even a shirker can become a major worker in the gospel enterprise – the kind of man or woman or young person for whom the old apostle calls. In a few months, **Luke, Mark and Timothy** were all going to be gathered together for Paul’s departure.

Now that is a **tough team of friends** for tough times!

### 3. **“Bring” ... my necessities** (2 Tim. 4:13).

Then Paul requests certain items he considered necessities. “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all, the parchments” (4:13). In mentioning **“the cloak,”** it was clear Paul needed something to warm himself with in the dank prison cell. Since it was cold in Rome and getting colder, he asked for this necessity, later adding poignantly, “Do your best to come before winter” (4:21a).

In asking for **his “books and, above all, the parchments,”** Paul was emphasizing that it was the animal-skin, precious vellum codices that he especially wanted. Certainly this was a reference to a copy of the Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament – and possibly some scrolls containing his own personal notes or copies of some of his letters (George W. Knight, p. 467). Some scholars speculate the parchments may have also have contained copies of the Lord’s sayings or even early narratives of his life (Thomas C. Oden, 1989, p. 178-179). Intriguing speculations, indeed!

### 4. **“Beware ...”** (2 Tim. 4:14-15).

We know three important commodities were coming to Rome in the next few months, all set to arrive on the same day – Timothy, Mark, and the Scriptures. The journey of each of these would be precarious. Would Paul be able to receive them? Thus the final directive: “Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his misdeeds. You also must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message” (4:14-15). The “harm” likely came from Alexander’s informing on Paul. In fact, he may have been the direct cause of his arrest (George W. Knight, p. 467). We don’t know anything else about “Alexander the coppersmith” than this. In any case, Timothy and Mark had to be on their guard against him.

Paul needed each of them: **friends and Scriptures together.** That is what strengthened him in his final days. If I could have added one more thing it would be music – good music often strengthens my soul. So here’s the deal. If they managed to get to Paul they would have encouraged his soul. His friends would have loved him and the Scriptures would have fortified him.

Can you imagine the wonderful theological and spiritual -- and jovial -- conversation they would have had as they poured over the parchments together? **They would have fed on the Word of God together.** They would have sought out Christ in all the Scriptures together and rejoiced in his presence with them as they ate and talked together (Lk. 24;25-26, 44-46). **And they would have strategized together.** Paul was the missionary general of the apostolic church and they were his colonels. They would have agreed together where the next strategic places of advance for the gospel might be. **Maybe they even had a strategy session about what they would next write.** After all, the three of them wrote more than half of the New Testament! Did they discuss the Gospels and Luke and Mark later would write? If so what advice did Paul provide? I would have liked to have eavesdropped in on their conversation.

**Tough friends for tough times.**

That is what we all need.

And that is what we must be.

Amen

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