

**“Final Confidence”**  
2 Timothy 4:16-22 (NRSV)

Most of you know I enjoy reading. **I like stories of all kinds.** Usually, I read them from the beginning to the end; occasionally, however, I will flip to the last pages to see how the story will end. Some think that’s cheating or, at least, that that cannot be much fun. But, on the contrary, I find out this way, no matter how bad things look during the story, I don’t have to worry because I already know the end of the story.

That’s how we think about **the story of Jesus Christ.** It is a lovely story, but it is a story filled with increasing threats. Things seem to go from bad to worse. The religious authorities have it in for him. He is increasingly beleaguered with questions and intimidation. He is finally arrested, given some kind of trial, and executed on a cross. But all of us know he will rise from the dead on Easter Day. No matter how bad things look, we don’t have to worry, because we know the end of the story. So, too, it is with **the story of the apostle Paul.** We know his final destiny.

Some five years before the end of this story as it winds down in these final pages of his Second – and last -- Letter to Timothy, **Paul had returned to Jerusalem** from his third missionary journey with high hopes that his preaching would at last receive a positive hearing among his own people. In taking care to make no offense, he underwent a traditional seven days of purification rites with several others and paid for all the expenses. But his hopes unravelled when, near the end of the seven days, some visiting Jews from Asia saw Paul in the temple and grabbed him shouting, “Fellow Israelites, help! This is the man who is teaching everywhere against our people, our law, and this place....” (Acts 21:28a). And because they’d seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in Jerusalem (21:29), they also wrongly accused Paul of bring Greeks into the temple precincts, a taboo infraction.

Chaos ensued; **there was a riot.** Paul was severely beaten and his life was seriously at risk. Roman soldiers intervened and took him into safe-custody. Amazingly, though clearly rejected, Paul stopped on his way up the steps into the soldiers’ barracks in the Antonia fortress to say a few more words to his people. He told them how he’d come to preach the gospel. Hearing his flawless Aramaic, the mob quieted and listened to his epic, lengthy testimony. But when he referred to his mission to the Gentiles, the crowd again went berserk and the soldiers had to take him inside (21:30-22:23).

**Paul escapes flogging** by the soldiers only when they learned he was a natural-born Roman citizen (22:24-29). The next day, in an attempt to get to the bottom of the matter, the Roman commander arranged for Paul to speak to the Sanhedrin. **Talk about eerie echoes of his Lord's interrogation!** He got the same negative reception from the religious establishment and again had to be taken into safe-custody by the Roman guard (23:1-10).

This was probably **one of the darkest times in Paul's life**. His high hopes of convincing the leadership of his people of the truth of the gospel had gone up in smoke. He also must have feared that his vision to take the gospel to Rome would become ashes. As he sat aching in one of the cells of the tower of the Antonia fortress – remnants of which can still be seen in Jerusalem today – black-and-blue, bloodied, rejected and discouraged, **Paul needed some assurance**. And he got it, as few mortals ever have. The Bible tells us in the book of the Acts of the Apostles: “That night the Lord stood near him and said, ‘Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome’” (23:11). Subsequently, Paul did take courage, and he asked the Roman authorities to appeal his case in Rome and he went there as a prisoner of the emperor (25:10-12).

And during his first imprisonment, he wrote to the Philippian friends,

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear (1:12-14).

**Christ's presence with him**, and his charge – “**Keep up your courage**” – became the refrain of Paul's incredible life. And here at the very end, during his second and last imprisonment, it is his coda. The thought echoes again in this passage as we see Paul finding comfort in his Saviour and Lord's presence in these final moments of his life, awaiting his death.

### 1. **The building of Paul's confidence** (2 Tim. 4:16-17).

Curiously, Paul relates that during his first opportunity for defense he found himself **abandoned**. But he is not angry or vindictive. He is at peace: “At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not

be counted against them!” (4:16). The Roman judicial process initially involved what was called a **“first action”** (primo actio), a **preliminary hearing**, before the emperor himself or, more usually, before a magistrate, to find out if there was any real evidence for a full-blown trial. Unaccountably, this defense appeared to be a solo event for Paul. There was no witness or advocate standing forward on Paul’s behalf. No one was there at all! We surmise Luke, who was with Paul (2 Tim. 4:11), must’ve been somewhere else, perhaps on some errand, otherwise he would certainly have been there. But it is a complete mystery why **no members of the Christian church in Rome**, with whom he was so close, **were there**. Not one! Perhaps it was for fear of the Roman authorities.

Whatever the reasons, the situation was pathetic – scandalous! Here was the great missionary general, who’d weathered the storms of several continents for the gospel, standing alone before the Roman court. It seems impossible, but it was a fact.

Remarkable in the face of such abandonment was **Paul’s gracious attitude** – “May it not be held against them!” No bitterness here – only a prayer for God’s forgiveness. How like Jesus on the cross he was.

**Paul was abandoned by his friends, but not by Jesus.** He writes, “But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth” (4:17). As to whether Jesus stood with Paul physically, or in a vision, or spiritually, we are not told. The language can be understood in several ways, although the event took place in the public Roman court. I suspect it was an overwhelming spiritual awareness of the presence of Christ that Paul experienced. I suspect Paul knew his Psalms well. As a few verses in one of my favourite psalms, **Psalm 139**, declare:

Where can I go from your spirit?  
 Or where can I flee from your presence?  
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
 if I make my bed in Sheol [or the Pit], you are there.

...

Even there your hand shall lead me,  
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.

(Ps. 139:7-8,10)

Paul never thought of **God as spatially near or remote**. He knew that God is “carried here or there in his heart” (A. W. Tozer, Born After Midnight, 1989, p. 119-120). The visits to Paul by Jesus Christ in the Antonia fortress, as at other important times during his life, and now in the courtroom in Rome, were a reprise of what had happened some 600 years earlier to Daniel in the lion’s den in Babylon (Daniel 6). I am sure Paul connected with this, or he wouldn’t have mentioned “the lion’s mouth.” The same God that was with Daniel and all God’s people whenever he was needed was with him.

Moreover **Jesus Christ was “in” him, and he was “in Christ”**. For Paul, being aware of Christ’s presence was as natural as breathing. Being “**in Christ**” was a phrase he often repeated in his letters (James S. Stewart, A Man in Christ, 1935). The wondrous reality was that the Lord was at Paul’s side as he stood before the awful might of imperial Rome at his first hearing and that, in Paul’s words, he “gave me strength” – or as the commentator, A. T. Robertson renders it, “poured power into me.” It was as if a pair of power cables had been attached to Christ and then to Paul, so that Jesus’ voltage poured into Paul and revived and refreshed him.

Paul’s spirit lifted and was expanded with God’s power, “so that,” Paul said, “through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it” (4:17b). Paul saw this opportunity of preaching the gospel, even while he was on trial, in the official center of Rome, the mistress of the nations at the time, as the fulfilling of his call (J. H. Bernard, The Pastoral Epistles, 1980, p. 148). So he gave the court both barrels! His message was probably something like what he delivered before Felix and Agrippa back “home” in Palestine (Acts 24, 26). As he was then, Paul must have been awesome in Rome as he preached Christ, with Christ at his side, for the Saviour poured his presence and his power into him!

The result was, says Paul, “So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth” (4:17c) – that is from immediate condemnation and instant execution. The court’s jaws could easily have immediately snapped shut. Instead, the court held that there must be a subsequent hearing, and thus granted Paul **a temporary stay of proceedings**.

## 2. **The declaration of Paul's confidence** (2 Tim. 4:18).

**Paul did not expect acquittal – he was certain of death.** We know that from the thoughts he expressed in the previous verses (2 Tim. 4:6-8) about having finished the fight and run the course. He looked death straight in the face and roared back with confidence: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (4:18).

**Paul was confident of rescue.** His confidence was not an expectation of deliverance from death, but rather that no “evil attack” of Satan, the ultimate enemy of our souls, would undermine his faith or his courage or cause him to lapse into disastrous sin. Further, he considered that death would deliver him once and for all from all evil. It appears that Paul had been praying the sixth petition of the Lord's prayer – “but deliver us from evil” (KJV) – and he was confident that this would always happen during his life – as it did – and, finally, at his martyrdom.

**Paul was confident of heaven.** Ironically, death held in one of its hands his deliverance, but in the other hand his destination – heaven. Paul calls it a “heavenly kingdom” because he was already in Christ's kingdom, but this would be the heavenly aspect for which he had been preparing and training his whole life long.

Such soaring confidence as Paul had came from **Paul's strong belief in God's Holy Word.** In the same way the prophets of old depended upon God's Word, and our Lord did while he was here on earth, especially while he was tempted in the wilderness, God's Word was both Paul's life and food (Deut. 32:45-47; 1 Kgs. 17:5; 19:5; and Matt. 4:4). His confidence was also shored up by his long experience of following God. Paul's yesterdays were prophecies of his tomorrows. And his tomorrows with Christ would be like his todays with Christ.

Everyone expects the sun to rise tomorrow and for millions of years to come. Yet there will come a day when it will not rise. There will be a last time, the very last. But Christ and his Word will not change; they will remain the same forever (Matt. 5:18).

Thus **Paul had complete confidence.**

Paul's heart was such that nearly every time he discoursed on God's power and goodness, he broke into **doxology**. Here he offers simply one line: "'To him [that is, to God] be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.'" "To him," refers back to "the Lord" – a common title for Jesus Christ, which makes this and Romans 9:5 the only Scriptural doxologies offered to Christ. As Paul looked at his imminent death, Christ filled his horizon. Christ would give him "the crown of righteousness" (4:8). He would be with Christ, "which is better by far" (Php. 1:23). It was Christ who held his – and our -- citizenship papers and who would transform his body -- and "the body of our humiliation" -- so that it "may be conformed to the body of his glory" (Php. 3:20-21). "To Christ be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

### 3. **Final graces** (2 Tim. 4:19-22).

Names were important to Paul. Christ's name was important, and the names of his friends were important. Like any good pastor, Paul knew that the mention of someone's name would assure a friend of his or her significance. So he greeted the extraordinary wife and husband team, "Priscilla and Aquila," (4:19a) who had served with him in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome and who were now back in Ephesus. He greeted "the household of Onesiphorus" (4:19b) – the family of the man who had refreshed him so much when Paul had first arrived in Rome. Significantly, he didn't mention Onesiphorus himself. Had this faithful friend now died on his way back home? We don't know. Paul also conveys personal knowledge about a certain "Erastus" and "Trophimus" to Timothy (4:20). Erastus had "remained in Corinth" -- was he stuck there for some good or bad reason? Trophimus had been left behind, "ill in Miletus" – did he require help? Timothy would know what to do.

Although we might guess "Do your best to **get here before winter**" (4:21a) was a reference to Paul's growing discomfort from the cold, it is also important to remember the ancient shipping lanes were considered to be closed to traffic from November 10<sup>th</sup> to March 10<sup>th</sup>. If Timothy was going to get to him in time, he'd better hurry. Surely Timothy hustled to get there, and would have been there with Paul and Luke and Mark when – if Clement of Rome is correct – Paul was taken outside of the city and beheaded at the Ostian Gate.

**Alfred Lord Tennyson** has some lovely lines for this moment:

But looking upward, full of grace  
 He prayed, and from a happy place  
 God's glory smote him on the face.

Paul then conveyed **some greetings** from some members of the Roman Christian church. "Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brothers and sisters" (4:21b). Only one is known, and that is "**Linus**" who almost certainly succeeded Peter as the leader of the Roman church, according to Irenaeus in his book Against Heresies (3:3). I wonder if this final passage in Paul's Second Letter to Timothy is where Charles Schultz chose Linus' name to rank among the most adorable among his "Peanuts" gang?

Now come **the very final written words** of the Apostle Paul – a benediction and an expression of grace. The **benediction** – "The Lord be with your spirit" – is in the singular, being for Timothy alone. "This final greeting is for you my buddy, my friend, my son." "May your spirit be strong." "May your spirit be blessed." "May the spirit of Jesus Christ be and remain with your spirit forever." The expression of **grace** – "Grace be with you" -- is in the plural, being for the whole Christian community. Every one of Paul's benedictions -- and they are many – contains the word "grace." So Paul's final word and wish was that God's unmerited favour, forgiveness and enabling power would be showered upon all his children.

Some day before I die I hope to go to the **Chester Beatty Library** museum in Dublin Castle, Ireland to see, among other things, the oldest known copies of the letters of Paul extant. They were found in the desert sand of Egypt, near Cairo, in the 1930s. They are dated from about 180 to 200 years AD. Knowing Paul died at the age of 65 in the year of our Lord 65 means these copies are only removed 120 years from Paul's passing from the scene. And even though we read them now, 1944 years later, the spirit of the old apostle also lives on.

So "the Lord be with your spirit." And "grace be with you" all.

Amen

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