

2 Timothy 4

M. W. Bassford, 5-9-10

As human beings, we invest the last words we have to say in life with a tremendous amount of significance. In the legal realm, a man's dying declaration is admissible as evidence because it is assumed that he will not lie in the presence of death. In the historical realm, many men have tried to use their last breaths to say something memorable, that will encapsulate who they are to those who come after them. Sometimes, the results are stirring, as when the patriot Nathan Hale declared, "My only regret is that I have but one life to give for my country." Sometimes, the results are tragic. Oscar Wilde's last words were, "This wallpaper is killing me. One of us has got to go." If you know anything about Oscar Wilde's life, such a witty but trivial thought is perfectly in line with the way he lived the rest of his days too.

We don't know what the apostle Paul's last words were. The historical record of his life in Acts ends with his first imprisonment in Rome, not his second. However, we get as close as we can to his dying declaration, to the things that he wanted to say to encapsulate his life, in 2 Timothy 4. Appropriately, these last words are addressed to others, and they are about others. Paul neither preached in a vacuum nor worked in a vacuum. Instead, his life was about the service that he could render to his brother and to his neighbor, and he knew that those he loved would continue to need help after he was gone. To this end, we see him pass the torch of his ministry to Timothy. Paul was also concerned with instructing his protégé in how he needed to deal with many others in Paul's life, both friends and adversaries. Ultimately, though, Paul is concerned about his relationship with God, and his last words are most of all an expression of his contentment with the way that he has lived his life. Let's consider all these things tonight in 2 Timothy 4.

Service to God.

Paul begins this valediction by summarizing his expectations for **TIMOTHY'S MINISTRY**. We see Paul's charge to Timothy preserved in 2 Timothy 4:1-2. This is a particularly solemn passage of Scripture, and part of what lends it its solemnity is the lofty phrasing with which Paul begins. According to the legal traditions of 2000 years ago, it was customary to have witnesses to an agreement. Even today, a will must be attested to by the signature of two witnesses before it is valid. Here, though, the witnesses to the obligation that Paul lays on Timothy are none other than God and Jesus Christ. They, in all of their might and majesty, are the ones who are going to watch to see that Timothy lives up to his duty. Today, friends, we have the same witnesses watching us. When we became disciples of Jesus, we agreed to serve Him according to His will, and both God and the Lord were parties to that agreement. Our commitment to Christ is a solemn and sacred thing, and we have a responsibility to live up to it, or else we will be held accountable.

Before these witnesses, Timothy is instructed to preach the word. It doesn't matter if people are thronging to obey the gospel or thronging to lynch the preacher. His responsibility is the same. Timothy is required not just to exhort—to say positive things, but also to reprove, to gently correct, and rebuke, firmly correct. In this, he must remain patient no matter the provocation, and he must never stop teaching. Even if we aren't preachers like Timothy, we still must handle the word like he did. The Lord must be on our lips at all times. We can't show off our faith to people whom we think will be impressed, and then hide it from those we think will be hostile. Nor can we concentrate on the sweetness and light aspects of the gospel and avoid telling sinners the hard truth about their sin. Instead, in both word and deed, we must faithfully reflect the content of the gospel. That's the only way that we can be pleasing to God.

This was critical for Timothy, and it's critical for us, because of the temptation to cater to **ITCHING EARS**. Paul warns against people with such ears in 2 Timothy 4:3-5. Here, Paul implies what Jesus says plainly in Matthew 7. Most people are going to prefer a lie to the truth about God's word because the truth is hard and the lie is easy. They'd rather hear what makes them feel good than what will save their souls. Their ears are itching for the lie, and they're looking for teachers who will comfort them with fables. Individually, and as a congregation, we could cater to people like that. We can stop teaching the hard truths about instrumental music, and baptism, and use of church money. Every Sunday, I can preach lessons about how God is the great big cuddle bear of love, and how He doesn't expect us to do anything. We can take "church of Christ" off the sign, just in case it offends somebody, and we can become a community church. If we do, we will see all kinds of folks come pouring through that door to hear our do-nothing gospel. In fact, there are many so-called churches of Christ who are taking those steps and seeing those results right now.

Of course, there's one little problem with that. In order to gain the approval of men, we have to forfeit the approval of God. In taking the easy road, we will abandon the great work of truly saving souls, and we will fail to fulfill the charge that God has laid on us. Our obligation to teach and serve doesn't exist only in the easy times. God requires us to endure suffering too if it is necessary for His name's sake. Of course, if we are the source of our own suffering, that wins no favor with God. We must be wise in carrying out God's will, but however we teach, our teaching must be based and centered on the word. Otherwise, no matter what men think, our work for God will be meaningless.

In his life, Paul made the hard choice but the right choice, and that's why he could speak of **HIS DEPARTURE** as he did. His thoughts on the matter appear in 2 Timothy 4:6-8. Paul had clearly been told that he wasn't long for this life. He knew that his life was going to be poured out as a sacrifice before God. Looking back, though, he had no regrets. He could consider all of the suffering and persecution that he had endured and know that it was not in vain. At the end of his career as a soldier of Christ, he had finally reached the point where he could lay his weapons down. He could look ahead and see the finish line of heaven. He could speak with confidence of the reward that he was going to receive, not because his works were so great and wonderful, but because he knew that he had faithfully served God until the end.

What's significant about this passage, though, is that Paul says this crown of righteousness isn't just for him. It's for all who have loved the appearing of the Lord. We may not have Paul's gifts. We may never find ourselves in a position where we have the opportunity to do as much good as he did, or, conversely, face the severe persecution that he faced. God chooses those things, not us. What's important is that we serve in the way that we have been given, that we fight the foes we face, that we run the race that is before us. Most of all, what's important is that we love the appearing of the Lord, that more than anything else, we live for the day when we will see Jesus. If we live our lives in this way, even if the world regards us as too insignificant to notice, God will notice, and He will be pleased with us. If we reach the point where we can say what Paul said, we can go to our deathbeds with assurance, confident of eternal reward.

Paul's Final Days.

Of course, Paul's entire attention wasn't yet fixed on heaven, as we see from his commentary on **OTHER PEOPLE**. We find this in 2 Timothy 4:9-15. At the moment, Paul seems to be feeling abandoned, both personally and professionally. Demas, a longtime partner of Paul's, a man who had been praised by him in Colossians and Philemon, has abandoned Christ altogether. Other men have gone in other directions. Only a man named Alexander the coppersmith seems to be dedicated, but he's dedicated to opposing Paul, not helping him. Paul needs reinforcements, so he appeals to Timothy to come himself and to bring Mark with him. This is interesting, because this is the same Mark who abandoned Paul way, way back during the first missionary journey, the Mark who had been the source of division between Paul and Barnabas. Now, though, this is a man Paul wants with him, because Paul knows he will be useful for service.

In this, there are two main lessons for us. First, if an A-list Christian like Paul still needed brethren around to encourage and support him, then how much more do we, who aren't operating on the same level as Paul, need help from others? The truth is that an isolated Christian is a weak Christian and soon to be a dead Christian. Conversely, the more brethren we invite into our lives, the stronger we become. Let's remember that, and build as many relationships in the church as we can, and also look for others who may be isolated and reach out to them. Also like Paul, we need to be willing to give second chances to Christians who have disappointed us. None of us are perfect. We all make mistakes, even big ones like John Mark made. However, one of the blessings we have as children of God is the ability to learn from those mistakes and grow beyond them. We need to be willing to give credit for that growth to our brethren too.

Paul was willing to forgive even big mistakes, as we see from his description of **HIS DEFENSE**. Consider with me 2 Timothy 4:16-18. This text is apparently a reference to Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, which most likely culminated in a trial before the emperor Nero. Nero was a homicidal maniac, and rather than drawing the maniac's attention, all of Paul's companions fled. Paul's attitude toward that is one of understanding for his friends' failings rather than desire to condemn, and ultimately, he's able to be so forgiving because of the One who did not desert him—God. Through God, even in that perilous situation, the gospel was preached, bearing fruit even in Nero's own personal guard, and Paul himself was rescued to preach another day. Ultimately, the presence of the Lord was all that Paul needed.

Paul's confidence in God is so great that he expresses his confidence that God is going to rescue him once again, even though he's just revealed his impending death eight verses earlier. This might seem like a contradiction, but it wasn't to Paul. He wasn't concerned about his physical body. He was concerned that God keep his soul safe and deliver it into heaven. Paul knew that his earthly self would expire soon anyway. He relied on God to protect his immortal self, because that was what mattered. This is what our lives boil down to too. Regardless of what our friends do, regardless of what happens to our bodies, the two most important issues we face are the same ones that Paul faced: "Is God with me?" and "Will He rescue my soul when I pass on?" That's where God does His greatest work, a work that we need done above all else, and if we have His assurance that He will do it in our lives, everything else is immaterial.

Finally, though, Paul closes this letter, as he commonly does, with a few **GREETINGS**. Consider with me 2 Timothy 4:19-22. Here again we see a number of familiar names: the husband-wife team of Priscilla and Aquila, Onesiphorus, who had done so much for him during his imprisonment, Trophimus, an Ephesian who was his companion throughout the last part of Acts. Paul also passes on the greetings of a handful of unfamiliar saints, presumably new friends he'd made among the brethren at Rome. Once again, this emphasizes just how important other brethren were to Paul, and how important they should be to us. His final words, though, are a blessing, a request that God's presence and grace be with Timothy. They were all that Timothy needed, and even today, they are all that we need too.