

THE PROMISE OF LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

We come to this second letter to Timothy with quickened anticipation, realizing that these are the last recorded words of the Apostle Paul. Tradition tells us that shortly after this letter was written, Paul was taken out on the Ostian Way, outside the city of Rome, and there on an April morning he was beheaded.

This letter to Timothy is called a prison epistle because it was written at a time when the apostle was imprisoned for the cause of the gospel. But there is a vast difference of atmosphere between this and the first letter. That letter was written after the time Luke describes in the last paragraph of the book of Acts, when he tells us that Paul dwelt in his own hired house in Rome. Though chained to a Roman guard, Paul nevertheless had a good deal of freedom to move around in the house. He could have friends in to see him; he held meetings; he had companions who lived with him; and he had a great, hopeful sense that he would be released. But in the second letter to Timothy everything is different. The atmosphere seems to be much more gloomy and dark.

This second letter was probably written about four or five years after the first one. As best the scholars can piece together the circumstances, Paul seems to have been released from the first imprisonment, and then resumed his travels about the Roman Empire, taking Titus and Timothy with him. He went to the island of Crete, where he left Titus to set things in order in the new church that was growing there. He came on to Ephesus again, and there he left Timothy to set in order certain things in the church there. He himself went on up into Macedonia, and from there he wrote his first letter to Timothy.

Then, somewhere along the line, Paul probably took voyage to Spain. There is some evidence that he fulfilled his long standing desire to reach the western part of the Roman Empire and to minister in Spain. Some even feel there is evidence that he got up as far as Britain, though that is uncertain. But it seems clear that he returned to the eastern parts of the Mediterranean and was rearrested, probably in the city of Troas, north of Ephesus, this time under the terrible atmosphere of the Neroian persecution.

The Emperor Nero had tried to blame the Christians for the great fire that destroyed the city of Rome, and opposition had broken out against Christians all through the Empire. For the first time they began to be subjected to bitter persecution. Christians were burned as living torches to light the Emperor's social gatherings. They were thrown to lions; they were killed by gladiators. They were widely despised throughout the Empire as being cannibals because they talked about eating the body and blood of Christ. They were thought to be atheists because they did not worship the idols that the pagans worshipped. They were said to be revolutionaries because they denied the ultimate authority of Caesar and said that Jesus was Lord. So opposition against Christians had sharpened across the Empire.

Following his second arrest, the apostle seems to have been imprisoned in a dungeon in the city of Rome. Tradition tells us this was the Mamertine Dungeon, located just across the street from the old senate building in the Roman Forum. You can still visit there today. There is a circular cell you enter by descending some steps; its only light is an open hole in the roof. There, beside the river, dank and dark and cold, was very likely where the Apostle Paul wrote this last letter to Timothy, his dear son in the faith.

The atmosphere of the letter reflects those circumstances. Paul is lonely: He will say in the paragraph we look at this morning, "I long night and day to see you." He is feeling abandoned: He writes, "All those in Asia have turned against me," {2 Tim 1:15}. "Only Luke is with me," {2 Tim 4:11a KJV}. "Demas has forsaken me and gone to Thessalonica," {cf, 2 Tim 4:10}. He is cold of body: He asks Timothy to bring the cloak which he left in Troas {cf, 2 Tim 4:13a}. He is bored in the long hours with little to do: He asks for the books and the parchments which he left behind in Troas {cf, 2 Tim 4:13b}. He is certain that the end of his life is at hand: He writes, "The time of my departure has come... I have finished the course, I have kept the faith," {cf, 2 Tim 4:6-7}. There is that word of clear anticipation that he had reached the end of his life.

Yet, despite the dark days, the letter opens with Paul's usual calm and confident expression of faith and grace. Verse 1:

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life which is in Christ Jesus,
To Timothy, my beloved child:
Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. {2 Tim 1:1-2
RSV}**

It was always Paul's greatest boast and highest honor that he had been called to be an apostle of Jesus the Messiah, not of his own choosing, but, "by the will of God."

That is a rather remarkable claim. Here the apostle is lifting himself to a level with the twelve disciples, whom Jesus himself had chosen and ultimately sent out with the great commission to "go into all the nations of the world and preach the gospel to every creature," {cf, Mark 16:15}. To add oneself to that chosen group would be an act of arrogant presumption if it were not true, as Paul consistently claimed, that God had chosen him, that the Lord Jesus had appeared to him, not only on the Damascus Road when he was first converted, but many times since, and imparted to him the same truths that he taught the twelve when he was with them in the flesh. The fact that Paul knew that same body of truth is what convinced the twelve apostles that he was indeed a chosen vessel of the Lord. So Paul reminds Timothy of that in order to stabilize him, and to help him understand that he is an authentic spokesman for the Lord Jesus.

Paul uses here a rather remarkable description of the gospel, which does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament. He calls it "the promise of life in Christ Jesus." Paul gloried in the message that he proclaimed. In Romans he wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God let loose among men, the power of God unto salvation," {cf, Rom 1:16}. The gospel changes people; it delivers them; it frees them; it heals them. The gospel brings people into the fullness of their manhood or womanhood; it sets them free to be what God intended them to be.

In Corinthians, Paul describes the gospel in these words: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels," {2 Cor 4:7}. We are weak men ourselves, he says, but what we have within us, this great gospel, is a treasure beyond compare. In Ephesians, Paul calls the gospel, "The unsearchable riches of Christ," {Eph 3:8}. In Colossians, he says it is, "Christ in you, the hope of glory," {Col 1:27b}; and in First Timothy he describes it as, "The glorious gospel of the blessed God," {1 Tim 1:11}. All those phrases are amplifications of what the apostle means when he writes here in Second Timothy, "the promise of life in Christ Jesus."

I have discovered that everybody everywhere, young and old alike, has a hunger for life. Nobody wants to be bored, nobody wants to live a dull, meaningless, empty, hollow life. We all want to live, to experience things, to feel alive and vital. This is what makes us vulnerable to the appeals of the world and the media, which constantly hold before us shortcuts to life, reminding us that we only go around once; we have to grab it while we can. "Live with gusto," we are told; "buy this deodorant or that toothpaste and you will live." It is amazing how much that idea takes hold of us.

Last week I watched on television an interview of Phil Donahue with a couple of punk rockers. They were a boy and a girl still in their early teens, and they had bleached their hair to a colorless blob; they both were wearing black lipstick, and they had powdered their faces so that they took on the pallor of death. Phil Donahue kept asking them, "Why do you dress in this bizarre style? Why do you seem to hunger after violence? Why do you get so carried away that you actually shed your own blood at times? What is behind this?" They responded, in all honesty, "What else is there?" Their answer was a silent protest against the emptiness of life, against the sense of being cheated by life, by the world and by society. Their answer is not justified. No one can blame any particular group of people or force for this kind of thing. It is a product of the world in which we live. As I watched that program, however, I could see the emptiness of young people who ought to be hungry for life, looking forward to it, but instead are disillusioned and despairing. What they have tasted already of life has left them feeling hopeless, empty and abandoned.

This gives point to Paul's word when he declares, at the end of his career, that in the gospel, and only in the good news about Jesus, is there found the promise of life. He is talking about life as God intended it to be lived, a quality of life which one can experience right now, not, as many often think Christianity teaches, "pie in the sky by and by." That is part of it, yes. Life does not end once we leave this earthly scene -- it expands infinitely in the hope of the gospel -- but it begins now. That is the point. This letter highlights for us a quality of life which one can experience right in the midst of circumstances that are falling apart.

So to this introverted, sensitive, sometimes fearful young man in Ephesus, Paul describes again the ingredients of the promise of life in Jesus Christ.

That is what is meant by the words, "Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." We read those words oftentimes as though they are merely words of greeting, but they are not. They are Paul's reminder in all his letters that grace, mercy, and peace are what make up the daily supply of life in Jesus Christ.

1. Grace is what God gives us that we do not deserve -- all the fullness of blessing that is ours without any effort whatsoever on our part. Grace consists of, for one thing, the forgiveness of our sins. What a marvelous thing that is! The older I grow the more I value this great gift of the gospel -- the forgiveness of sins, the lifting of the guilt of life. There is false guilt in our lives, I know. The enemy is quick to try to make us feel guilty about things we ought not feel guilty about. But there is also a very great load of true guilt for things we have done, for the loveless attitudes, the hurtful, hateful, shameful actions we have indulged in, the rebellious, defiant attitudes and actions that have hurt many. But the glorious word of the gospel is that, because of the death of Jesus as our substitute, God is rendered free to lift the load of that guilt and to not hold our transgressions against us.

That is a great blessing. It is one we ought to enjoy from day to day and week to week because it is not merely at the beginning of the Christian life that this is true, it is true all the way through. Every day we can start with a fresh, new sheet because of the forgiveness of our sins.

Then there is the consciousness of God's love and presence, not only to forgive us, but to welcome us. In the gospel we feel ourselves welcomed home like the prodigal son, with a Father's arms about us, a Father's loving concern for us, and a Father's welcome in his heart. That too is part of the gospel.

With it comes the sense of the power to obey God's word, an inner strengthening of our will that when we set it in the direction he tells us to go, we find we are able to do what we could not do before because of the grace and strength of Jesus who goes with us. This is what makes it possible for alcoholics to leave their drinking, for homosexuals to turn from their wrongful partners and begin to develop again the heterosexual impulses in their lives; this is what enables marriages that are breaking apart to hang together, because God has said he will give strength to walk in his ways when we agree to follow.

Then there is the insight and the understanding that God imparts to us. All this is part of the grace of God which is given constantly to us -- things we do not deserve, but which we nevertheless have by faith in Christ.

2. Then there is mercy. The difference between mercy and grace is that grace gives us what we do not deserve, while mercy withholds what we do deserve. It is God's mercy which tempers the trials of our lives and adjusts them to our weakness of faith and flesh. It is mercy that led the Lord Jesus to say to his disciples, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but you can't bear them yet," {cf, John 16:12}. He did not say these things until the disciples were strengthened by the coming of the Spirit to enable them to hear what he had to say.

The psalmist says, "It is of thy mercies that we are not consumed." I am amazed at how many people, even Christians, think that life ought to be without trial, that there ought to be sunshine all the way, that the normal, natural expectancy of life is that every day ought to be fun and delight with nothing

going wrong.

But that is totally unrealistic. In a fallen world the exact opposite is true. Every day ought to be nothing but disaster and sheer chaos. Every day, every moment ought to be filled with malice, hatred, viciousness and betrayal. The fact that those things only come rather infrequently into our lives is due to the mercies of God. "It is of his mercies that we are not consumed." We ought to expect nothing but the direst hardships, but actually we are given hours and days -- sometimes weeks and months -- of joy, blessing, peace, excitement and adventure. That is due to the mercies of God.

This is an especially meaningful word to use with Timothy. Paul does not use it in all his letters, but with Timothy he does because he wants to encourage this young man that God was tempering the trials that he would face.

3. "Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father." Peace is that inner sense of well-being when you realize that, no matter how dark it may look, there is a way through the trial that Jesus himself is with you and will go through it with you that he is totally in control of the event.

Steve Zeisler was right when, in his fine studies in Philippians, he said, "This is the great 'shalom' of God," the inner calm that keeps you panic proof.

Are you panic-proof? Have you learned that God is in charge, that the circumstances that come are of his permitting, that he is going to see you through and it will come out to blessing?

Those are the ingredients of the "promise of life in Christ Jesus."

- Grace, incredibly abundant grace, gives us what we do not deserve;
- Mercy withholds what we do deserve, it keeps us from getting all that we have coming; and
- Peace reassures us that it will all work out to our good and God's glory.

That is the "promise of life in Christ Jesus." That is wonderful good news, isn't it? I don't know why you don't rise up and say "Hallelujah!"

The Apostle Paul too needs a daily supply of grace, mercy, and peace. Here he is in his prison cell, missing Timothy with every moment, concerned about him that he will stand fast, and remain faithful and fruitful in Ephesus. Yet Paul is now aware that he must leave him, never to see him again in this violent, cold and cruel world, and so he writes (Verse 3):

I thank God whom I serve with a clear conscience, as did my fathers, when I remember you constantly in my prayers. As I remember your tears, I long night and day to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you. Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity [of fear] but a spirit of power and love and self-control. {2 Tim 1:3-7 RSV}

The paragraph begins, "I thank God," but that is really a rather weak rendering of what the Greek says. It should be, "When I think about you, Timothy, I have joy in God." That is putting the emphasis where it ought to be. It is not Timothy who is the ground of Paul's confidence, but the God who is at work in Timothy.

This ought to help us a lot in learning how to pray for one another. You do not pray because things seem to be going well in somebody's life. No, he may be falling apart, but, if God is in that life, you can pray with confidence because God will do his work. Remember how Paul wrote to the Philippians and said to them, in that oft-quoted verse, "I am confident of this very thing that he who began a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ," {cf, Phil 1:6 KJV}. That is where the ground of confidence in prayer for another rests. "I have joy in God," Paul says, "whom I serve with a clear conscience as did my fathers."

Here Paul is saying that, in his prayers for Timothy, he prays confidently because of his own clear conscience. The word is a "cleansed" conscience. Nobody would ever have a clear conscience because that requires a perfect record of behavior; to have a clear conscience means you have never done anything wrong. But that is not the word the apostle employs. He says "a cleansed conscience," which acknowledges that there have been many things which were wrong, but God has dealt with them. God has cleansed; God has washed them away.

Paul knows that this is what is happening with Timothy. Timothy may make mistakes -- he will fail, he will do some things that are wrong -- but God can cleanse his conscience. Paul says that has been his experience too. In fact, even before he became a Christian he learned this from his "fathers," i.e., his Jewish ancestors. They had been taught that when there is something wrong, when there is some guilt in your life, you bring a sacrifice and that cleanses your conscience. All Paul needed to learn was that the sacrifice God meant was the sacrifice of Jesus, the life and death of Jesus, that would cleanse the conscience from dead works. Paul had been doing that, and he could pray, on that ground, with confidence about Timothy because he knew God would cleanse his conscience as well.

More than that, Paul prayed constantly for Timothy because of four things he could not forget about him:

First, there was "his tears of love." Verse 4:

**As I remember your tears, I long night and day to see you, that I may be filled with joy.
{2 Tim 1:4 RSV}**

I do not know when Timothy wept with Paul. Many suggest, and I think this has merit, that this probably occurred when Paul was suddenly rearrested, torn from Timothy's company, and dragged off to his final imprisonment in Rome. Where this happened we are not sure. Personally, I think it probably happened in the city of Troas. Paul did not even have time to go back and get his belongings. Suddenly, in the midst of the terrible outbreak of persecution against Christians, a band of Roman soldiers grabbed him, and, without any explanation, dragged him away as a prisoner. Looking back, Paul could see Timothy's anguished face, and noted the tears running down the cheeks of this young man as he watched his dearly beloved father in the faith dragged off to jail. Paul says, "I can't forget that. Every time I think of you, Timothy, I see the tears running down your face, and it makes me pray for you."

Forty-two years ago I taught a Sunday School class of high school boys in Chicago. I was 21 then, and those boys who were in their early teens were not much younger than I. Among them were two boys, named Archie and Lloyd, whom I was particularly close to. I had spent a lot of time with them. We had studied the Word together, and prayed together; we had done some fun things together. They were dear to me, and I to them. But there came the time when I had to leave Chicago and go back to live in Denver. That was one of those moments when you know you probably will not see your friends again. Archie and Lloyd came with me to the train station, and as we said goodbye on the platform I remember so well the tears running down their faces. For many, many years, whenever I thought of that event, I was moved to pray for those two boys because I remembered their tears of love when we said goodbye.

This is what the apostle is doing here.

Is there someone you are thinking about, someone whose love and tears you remember when you had to leave? Are you reminded, as Paul was reminded of Timothy, to pray for that someone? "I remember you constantly in my prayers when I think of your tears of love."

Not only was Paul reminded of Timothy's tears, but also he was reminded of his sincere faith. Verse 5:

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you. {2 Tim 1:5 RSV}

This was the sturdy, genuine faith which Timothy exhibited even when he was a young man, probably a boy of only 16 or 17 years of age, when he came to Christ under Paul's ministry in the city of Lystra, in Asia Minor.

It is hard to know exactly what the apostle means when he speaks of this "sincere faith" which dwelt first in Timothy's grandmother and then in his mother. Commentators differ as to whether Paul was referring to the Christian faith or to a devout Jewish faith.

My wife and I were in Israel recently and we traveled about with a devout Jewish couple whose faith was strongly fixed on the Messianic promises of the Old Testament that God would send to Israel a Messiah. They knew we believed that Jesus was that Messiah, but they had not yet come to that conviction. Their faith, however, was solid and sure that there was coming a Messiah who would fulfill the promises of the prophets.

So it may have been that Paul meant that this Jewish grandmother and mother were godly Jews.

On the other hand, some of the commentators feel that it may well have been that these women were actually Christians before Timothy. On the day of Pentecost, perhaps, when 3,000 Jews were converted on one day, it may well have been that grandmother Lois was there. She too may have heard the words of Peter on that day proclaiming that God had made Jesus of Nazareth both Lord and Christ. Being pricked to her heart, she may have cried out, "Sir, what should we do?" It may have been that Lois came to Christ there, and then, coming back into the city of Lystra, she had led her daughter to the Lord.

When Eunice later married a Greek and they had a baby whom they named Timothy, the mother and the grandmother must have brought him up in the hope and expectation and knowledge of the Scriptures. (Paul will refer to that later in this letter.) But it was not until Paul came to Lystra and began to preach with great power the truth about Jesus that Timothy's heart opened and he too received the gift of life in Jesus Christ. Remembering that sincere faith that dwelt in Timothy, Paul is encouraged to pray for him.

The third thing that reminded Paul of Timothy was the spiritual gift that Timothy evidently had. Verse 6:

Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands. {2 Tim 1:6 RSV}

Most of the commentators refer this to the ordination (as they call it) of Timothy, when, a year or so after his conversion, Timothy joined the apostle and was sent out by the church to accompany Paul on his journey.

I have trouble with that, however, because I believe that the Scriptures teach that the gifts of the Spirit are imparted to us at our new birth in Christ. Just as the abilities, the natural talents we have, were given to us when we were first born into this earthly life, so the gifts of the Spirit are given to us when we are born again. If that is true, then this is not a reference to Timothy's ordination but to his conversion.

It may well have been that Timothy came to Christ at a public meeting, where, when he expressed his faith in Jesus, the elders of that meeting gathered and laid their hands on him, and, with the Apostle Paul, prayed for him. As we learned in the first letter to Timothy, some prophetic utterance was given that indicated that this was a young man who would be greatly used of God. Paul is reminding Timothy of the impartation of the gift of the Spirit.

I would say that this was the gift of an evangelist-teacher, one who is able to teach the Word with such attractiveness that non-Christians would come to Christ, for later in this very letter Paul says to Timothy, "Do the work of an evangelist." But whatever it was, it was a gift that needed to be kept alive, breathed upon and used, in order to function properly.

That is the way with all of our spiritual gifts. Every believer here has spiritual gifts. What a tragedy if you do not use them! That is why we need to hear this word that Paul addresses to Timothy: "Rekindle, stir up [like you would stir up the embers of a fire that is about to go out] the gift that is in you [which was given unto you by the Holy Spirit]."

That reminds Paul, every time he thinks of the spiritual gift that is lying latent in this young man, to pray for him.

Then the final thing is the fact that in Timothy there was clearly the indwelling Spirit of God himself. Notice the distinction Paul makes here. Speaking about the spiritual gift he says that "it was given to you, Timothy," but when he comes to the spirit that was in him he says, "God did not give us the spirit." Everybody does not have the same spiritual gift, but everyone has the gift of the Spirit, i.e., the Spirit himself indwelling us.

Here Paul says two wonderful things about him, a negative and a positive. The Spirit who is in us is not the spirit of fear. I do not know any statement in Paul's writings that is more practically important to us than that, because, if you are like me, you are oppressed and assaulted by a spirit of fear most of the time. Anxiety, worry, trembling about what is going to happen, a sense of terrible disaster looming, of chaos and crisis that is about to break upon us -- these are forms of fear; this is the spirit of fear. This verse says that these do not come from God.

Did it ever occur to you that Christians are forbidden to fear?

How many times in the Scriptures do we read that Jesus said, "Fear not!" "Let not your heart be troubled," {John 14:1, 14:27}. Do not let it go in that direction. Stop it when it starts going that way. God does not give us a spirit of fear. If we have such it is coming from another source, the enemy, who is the spirit of fear.

What is the spirit God has given us? First of all, it is power -- a spirit of power. There is one place in the history of each of us that a breakthrough occurs where the power of the enemy is broken. The power of the Lord is more triumphant, more victorious than the power of the enemy ever was. That is the place where we confront our situation by trust in the grace of God, the existential moment that we are facing at any precise time. The power of the enemy has been broken and God has given us a spirit of power so that we are able to refuse the wrong and obey the right when we set our wills to do so. This power is released to us when we choose to obey. It does not make us feel powerful -- we still feel weak -- but strength is imparted to us to walk on step by step and God will see us through.

Then the Spirit which God gives us is also the spirit of love, which means this is addressed to other people as well as to ourselves. We are expected not only to be concerned about our struggles and problems, but others' too, and we long to reach out to them to help them with their problems. Nothing is more proof to me that a person is filled with the Spirit than when he evidences concern for somebody else's problems. That is the spirit of love.

Finally, it is the spirit of sound judgment; that is the word Paul employs. It is not fanaticism; it is not talking constantly about dreams, visions, special revelations and wonderful experiences. It is talking about sober, realistic appraisals of a situation, deciding the right thing to do, and then, steadfastly, quietly, moving to do it. That is the spirit of sound judgment.

Last week a man came up to me at a service and handed me a piece of paper. When I read it later I found it was a rambling account of visions and special revelations he said he had had. Among them was a vision that he had had of Jesus, where Jesus suddenly appeared to him, just 3-1/2 feet from him -- exactly three and one-half feet! -- and he had seen him clearly. He saw the robe in which Jesus was dressed; he even saw, he said, that Jesus had had acne when he was a boy because the acne scars were still there. This had encouraged this man because he had had acne when he was a boy. How ridiculous! That kind of fanaticism is not the Spirit of God.

The Spirit of God is a spirit of power, love, and of sound judgment. When Paul thought about these things he was encouraged about Timothy. He could pray with confidence that God would bless him and use him.

When one sees a young man whose heart is awakened with love, who has a constant and quiet faith in the presence and the power of God, who has been given a gift of the Spirit that he has used to bless others' lives, and who is permanently indwelt by the Spirit of power and love and self-control, one can be confident that *that* man is going to stand, no matter what the circumstances. Even if there is temporary failure, God will bring him back. So, Paul says, "I glory, I joy in God who is able to do that with you, Timothy. God will hold you steady."

That is the introduction to the letter.

I hope it will encourage us as we go on in this to find the faith we need for the dark days that lie ahead.

May God help us.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the sincere faith that lays hold of the reality of your presence and steadies us in times of crisis, times of pressure, times of peril and danger to us. Help us to look onward and upward unto you. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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