

Last Words (2 Timothy 4)

A great person's last words are significant. They are a window that helps us to look into his heart, or a measure that helps us evaluate his life. In this chapter, we have Paul's last words to Timothy and to the church.

It is interesting that Paul expressed no regrets as he came to the end. He even forgave those who made his situation difficult (2 Tim. 4:16). More than seventeen people are referred to in this chapter, which shows that Paul was a friend-maker as well as a soul winner. Though his own days were numbered, Paul thought of others.

The apostle gave three final admonitions to Timothy, and he backed each of them up with a reason.

1. Preach the Word! (4:1–4)

"I charge thee" should read "I solemnly witness." This was a serious moment, and Paul wanted Timothy to sense the importance of it. It was serious, not only because Paul was facing death, but even more because both Paul and Timothy would be judged one day when Jesus Christ appeared. It would do us all good to occasionally reflect on the fact that one day we will face God and our works will be judged.

For one thing, this realization would encourage us to do our work carefully and faithfully. It would also deliver us from the fear of man; for, after all, our final Judge is God. Finally, the realization that God will one day judge our works encourages us to keep going even when we face difficulties. We are serving Him, not ourselves.

"Preach the Word!" is the main responsibility that Paul shared in this section. Everything else he said is related to this. The word preach means "to preach like a herald." In Paul's day, a ruler had a special herald who made announcements to the people. He was commissioned by the ruler to make his announcements in a loud, clear voice so everyone could hear. He was not an ambassador with the privilege of negotiating; he was a messenger with a proclamation to be heard and heeded. Not to heed the ruler's messenger was serious; to abuse the messenger was even worse.

Timothy was to herald God's Word with the authority of heaven behind him. The Word of God is what both sinners and saints need. It is a pity that many churches have substituted other things for the preaching of the Word—things that may be good in their place, but that are bad when they replace the proclamation of the Word. In my own pastoral ministry, I have seen what the preaching of the Word can do in churches and in individual lives, and I affirm that nothing can take its place.

Timothy should be diligent and alert to use every opportunity to preach the Word, when it is favorable and even when it is not favorable. It is easy to make excuses when we ought to be making opportunities. Paul himself always found an opportunity to share the Word, whether it was in the temple courts, on a stormy sea, or even in prison. "He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap" (Eccl. 11:4). Stop making excuses and get to work!

Preaching must be marked by three elements: conviction, warning, and appeal ("reprove, rebuke, exhort"). To quote an old rule of preachers, "He should afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted." If there is conviction but no remedy, we add to people's burdens. And if we encourage those who ought to be rebuked, we are assisting them to sin. Biblical preaching must be balanced.

God's speaker must be patient as he preaches the Word. He will not always see immediate results. He must be patient with those who oppose his preaching. Above all else, he must preach doctrine. He must not simply tell Bible stories, relate interesting illustrations, or read a verse and then forget it. True preaching is the explanation and application of Bible doctrine. Anything else is just religious speechmaking.

Paul gave the responsibility—"preach the Word" (2 Tim. 4:2)—and he also gave the reason (2 Tim. 4:3–4). The time would come (and it has been here for a long time!) when most people would not want the "healthy doctrine" of the Word of God. They would have carnal desires for religious novelties. Because of their "itching ears" they would accumulate teachers who would satisfy their cravings for things that disagree with God's truths. The fact that a preacher has a large congregation is not always a sign that he is preaching the truth. In fact, it may be evidence that he is tickling people's "itching ears" and giving them what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear.

It is but a short step from “itching ears” to turning one’s ears away from the truth. Once people have rejected the truth, they turn to fables (myths). It is not likely that man-made fables will convict them of sin or make them want to repent! The result is a congregation of comfortable, professing Christians, listening to a comfortable, religious talk that contains no Bible doctrine. These people become the prey of every false cult because their lives lack a foundation in the Word of God. It is a recognized fact that most cultists were formerly members of churches.

Note the emphasis on Scripture: “Preach the Word ... with ... doctrine.... They will not endure sound doctrine ... they shall turn away their ears from the truth” (2 Tim. 4:2–4). This emphasis on sound (healthy) doctrine runs through all three of Paul’s Pastoral Epistles, and this emphasis is surely needed today.

2. Fulfill Your Ministry (4:5–8)

“Make full proof of thy ministry” means “fulfill whatever God wants you to do.” Timothy’s ministry would not be exactly like Paul’s, but it would be important to the cause of Christ. No God-directed ministry is small or unimportant. In this final chapter, Paul named some co-laborers about whom we know nothing; yet they too had a ministry to fulfill.

A young preacher once complained to Charles Spurgeon, the famous British preacher of the 1800s, that he did not have as big a church as he deserved.

“How many do you preach to?” Spurgeon asked.

“Oh, about a hundred,” the man replied.

Solemnly Spurgeon said, “That will be enough to give account for on the day of judgment.”

We do not measure the fulfillment of a ministry only on the basis of statistics or on what people see. We realize that faithfulness is important and that God sees the heart. This was why Timothy had to be “sober in all things” (2 Tim. 4:5 NASB) and carry on his ministry with seriousness of purpose. (We have met this word “sober” many times in these letters.)

Timothy was not only a preacher; he was also a soldier (2 Tim. 2:3–4) who would have to “endure afflictions” (2 Tim. 4:5). He had seen Paul go through sufferings on more than one occasion

(2 Cor. 6:1–10; 2 Tim. 3:10–12). Most of Timothy’s sufferings would come from the “religious crowd” that did not want to hear the truth. It was the “religious crowd” that crucified Christ and that persecuted Paul and had him arrested.

“Do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5) would remind Timothy that all of his ministry must have soul winning at its heart. This does not mean that every sermon should be a “sawdust trail, hellfire-and-brimstone” message, because the saints need feeding as well. But it does mean that a preacher, no matter what he is preaching, should keep the lost souls in mind. This burden for the lost should characterize a pastor’s private ministry as well. (See Acts 20:17–21 for a description of a balanced ministry.)

God has given special men to the church as evangelists (Acts 21:8; Eph. 4:11), but this does not absolve a pastor from his soul winning responsibility. Not every preacher has the same gifts, but every preacher can share the same burden and proclaim the same saving message. A friend of mine went to hear a famous preacher, and I asked him how the message was. He replied, “There wasn’t enough gospel in it to save a flea!”

Paul gave the reason behind the responsibility (2 Tim. 4:6–8): He was about to move off the scene and Timothy would have to take his place. In this beautiful paragraph of personal testimony, you find Paul looking in three different directions.

(1) Paul looked around (v. 6). Paul realized that his time was short. He was on trial in Rome and had been through the first hearing (2 Tim. 4:17). But Paul knew that the end was near. However, he did not tremble at the prospect of death! The two words offered and departure (2 Tim. 4:6) tell us of his faith and confidence. “Offered” means “poured out on the altar as a drink offering.” He used the same picture in Philippians 2:7–8. In effect Paul was saying, “Caesar is not going to kill me. I am going to give my life as a sacrifice to Jesus Christ. I have been a living sacrifice, serving Him since the day I was saved. Now I will complete that sacrifice by laying down my life for Him.”

The word departure (2 Tim. 4:6) is a beautiful word that has many meanings. It means “to hoist anchor and set sail.” Paul looked on death as a release from the world, an opportunity to “set sail” into eternity. The word also means “to take down a tent.” This parallels 2 Corinthians 5:1–8, where Paul

compared the death of believers to the taking down of a tent (tabernacle), in order to receive a permanent, glorified body (“house not made with hands”—a glorified body, not a “mansion” in heaven).

Departure also has the meaning of “losing a prisoner.” Paul was facing release, not execution! “The unyoking of an ox” is another meaning of this word. Paul had been in hard service for many years. Now his Master would unyoke him and promote him to higher service.

(2) Paul looked back (v. 7). He summed up his life and ministry. Two of the images here are athletic: Like a determined wrestler or boxer, he had fought a good fight; and like a runner, he had finished his lifelong race victoriously. He had kept the rules and deserved a prize (see Acts 20:24; Phil. 3:13–14). The third image is that of a steward who had faithfully guarded his boss’s deposit: “I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7). Paul used this image often in his pastoral letters.

It is heartening to be able to look back and have no regrets. Paul was not always popular, nor was he usually comfortable; but he remained faithful. That is what really counted.

(3) Paul looked ahead (v. 8). A Greek or Roman athlete who was a winner was rewarded by the crowds and usually got a laurel wreath or a garland of oak leaves. The word for “crown” is *stephanos*—the victor’s crown; we get our name “Stephen” from this word. (The kingly crown is *diadema*, from which we get “diadem.”) However, Paul would not be given a fading crown of leaves; his would be a crown of righteousness that would never fade.

Jesus Christ is the “righteous judge” who always judges correctly. Paul’s judges in Rome were not righteous. If they were, they would have released him. How many times Paul had been tried in one court after another, yet now he faced his last Judge—his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When you are ready to face the Lord, you need not fear the judgment of men.

The crown of righteousness is God’s reward for a faithful and righteous life, and our incentive for faithfulness and holiness is the promise of the Lord’s appearing. Because Paul loved His appearing and looked for it, he lived righteously and served faithfully. This is why Paul used the return of Jesus Christ as a basis for his admonitions in this chapter (see 2 Tim. 4:1).

We are not called to be apostles, yet we can win the same crown that Paul won. If we love Christ’s appearing, live in obedience to His will, and do the work He has called us to do, we will be crowned.

3. Be Diligent and Faithful (4:9–22)

“Hurry and get here!” is the meaning of the admonition to Timothy (2 Tim. 4:9). Tychicus would take Timothy’s place in Ephesus (2 Tim. 4:12). As Timothy hurried to Rome, he could stop in Troas and get the cloak, books, and parchments (2 Tim. 4:13). Paul probably left them there in his haste to depart. It is touching to see that, in his closing days on earth, Paul wanted his dear “son in the faith” at his side. But he was also practical: He needed his cloak for warmth, and he wanted his books for study. The “books” would be papyrus scrolls, perhaps of the Old Testament Scriptures, and the “parchments” would be books made from the skins of animals. We do not know what these “parchments” were, but we are not surprised that a scholar such as Paul wanted material for study and writing.

Before he ended the letter, Paul urged Timothy to “come before winter” (2 Tim. 4:21). Why? All the ships would be in port during the winter since it would be too dangerous for sailing. If Timothy waited too long, he would miss his opportunity to travel to Paul, and then it would be too late.

Why should Timothy be diligent and faithful? Look at 2 Timothy 4:10, which gives part of the answer: Some in Paul’s circle were not faithful, and he could not depend on them. Demas is named only three times in the New Testament, yet these three citations tell a sad story of failure. Paul listed Demas along with Mark and Luke as one of his “fellow laborers” (Philem. 24). Then he is simply called “Demas” (Col. 4:14). Here (2 Tim. 4:10) it is “Demas hath forsaken me.”

Paul gave the reason: Demas “loved this present world.” He had, as a believer, “tasted ... the powers of the world to come” (Heb. 6:5), but he preferred “this present evil world” (Gal. 1:4). In his *Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan pictured Demas as the keeper of a silver mine at the Hill Lucre. Perhaps it was the love of money that enticed Demas back into the world. It must have broken Paul’s heart to see Demas fail so shamefully, yet it can happen to any believer. Perhaps this explains why Paul had so much to say about riches in his pastoral letters.

Another reason why Paul wanted Timothy in Rome was that his next hearing was coming up, and only Luke was with him. The believers in Rome and Ephesus who could have stood with Paul had failed him (2 Tim. 4:16), but Paul knew that Timothy would not fail him. Of course, the Lord had not failed Paul either (2 Tim. 4:17)! The Lord had promised to stay with Paul, and He had kept His promise.

When Paul had been discouraged in Corinth, the Lord came to him and encouraged him (Acts 18:9–11). After he had been arrested in Jerusalem, Paul again was visited by the Lord and encouraged (Acts 23:11). During that terrible storm, when Paul was on board ship, the Lord had again given him strength and courage (Acts 27:22ff.). Now, in that horrible Roman prison, Paul again experienced the strengthening presence of the Lord, who had promised, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (Heb. 13:5).

But note that Paul’s concern was not for his own safety or comfort. It was the preaching of the Word so that Gentiles might be saved. It was Paul’s special calling to minister to the Gentiles (see Eph. 3); and he was not ashamed of the gospel, even in the great city of Rome (Rom. 1:16).

What a man! His friends forsake him, and he prays that God will forgive them. His enemies try him, and he looks for opportunities to tell them how to be saved! What a difference it makes when the Holy Spirit controls your life.

“I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion” (2 Tim. 4:17). Who or what is this “lion”? It cannot mean a literal lion because Paul was a Roman citizen and if convicted, he could not be thrown to the lions. Instead, he would be executed by being beheaded. Was “the lion” Emperor Nero? Probably not. If he had been delivered from Nero, then this meant he was acquitted, yet, he had only had a preliminary first hearing. The lion is a symbol of Satan (1 Peter 5:8). Perhaps Paul was referring to some scheme of the Devil to defeat him and hinder the work of the gospel. To be “saved from the lion’s mouth” was a proverbial saying that meant “to be delivered from great danger” (see Ps. 22:21).

But for a Christian, there are things even more dangerous than suffering and death. Sin, for example. This is what Paul had in mind (2 Tim. 4:18). He was confident that the Lord would deliver him from “every evil work” and take him to the heavenly kingdom. Paul’s greatest fear was not of death; it was that he might deny his Lord or do

something else that would disgrace God’s name. Paul was certain that the time had come for his permanent departure (2 Tim. 4:6). He wanted to end his life-race well and be free from any disobedience.

It is heartening to see how many people are named in the closing part of this last letter Paul wrote. I believe that there are at least one hundred different men and women named in Acts and Paul’s letters, as a part of his circle of friends and fellow laborers. Paul could not do the job by himself. It is a great man who enlists others to help get the job done, and who lets them share in the greatness of the work.

Luke (2 Tim. 4:11) was the “beloved physician” who traveled with Paul (Col. 4:14). He is author of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. (Notice the “we” sections in Acts, the eyewitness reports of Dr. Luke.) Paul probably dictated this letter (2 Tim.) to Luke. Being a doctor, Luke must have appreciated Paul’s reference to gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17 NIV).

Crescens (2 Tim. 4:10) was sent by Paul to Galatia. We know nothing about him, nor do we really need to know. He was another faithful laborer who assisted Paul in an hour of great need.

Titus (2 Tim. 4:10) was Paul’s close associate and, along with Timothy, a trusted “troubleshooter.” Paul had left Titus in Crete to straighten out the problems in the churches there (Titus 1:5). As we study Paul’s letter to Titus, we get better acquainted with this choice servant of God. Titus had met Paul at Nicopolis during that period between Paul’s arrests (Titus 3:12). Now Paul had summoned him to Rome and sent him to Dalmatia (our modern Yugoslavia).

Mark (2 Tim. 4:11) was a cousin of Barnabas, Paul’s first partner in missionary service (Acts 13:1–3). His mother was a noted Christian in Jerusalem (Acts 12:5, 12). Unfortunately, John Mark failed on that first missionary journey (Acts 13:5, 13). Paul refused to take Mark on the second trip, and this led to a falling-out between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36–41). However, Paul now admitted that John Mark was a valuable worker; and he wanted Mark with him in Rome. How good it is to know that one failure in Christian service need not make one’s whole life a failure.

Tychicus (2 Tim. 4:12) was a believer from the province of Asia (Acts 20:4) who willingly accompanied Paul and probably ministered as a personal servant to the apostle. He was with Paul during his first imprisonment (Eph. 6:21–22; Col.

4:7–8). Paul sent Tychicus to Crete to relieve Titus (Titus 3:12). Now he was sending him to Ephesus to relieve Timothy. What a blessing it is to have people who can replace others! A relief pitcher may not get all the glory, but he may help win the game!

Carpus (2 Tim. 4:13) lived at Troas and gave Paul hospitality. Paul must have departed in a hurry (was he being sought for arrest?), because he left his cloak and books behind. However, Carpus was a faithful brother; he would guard them until somebody picked them up to take to Paul. Even such so-called menial tasks are ministries for the Lord.

Is Alexander the coppersmith (2 Tim. 4:14) the same Alexander mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:20? Nobody knows, and there is no value in conjecturing. The name was common, but it is possible that this heretic went to Rome to make things difficult for Paul. Satan has his workers too. By the way, Paul's words, "The Lord reward him according to his works" (2 Tim. 4:14), are not a prayer of judgment, for this would be contrary to Jesus' teaching (Matt. 5:43–48). "The Lord will reward him" is a better translation.

Prisca (or Priscilla) and Aquila (2 Tim. 4:19) were a husband-and-wife team who assisted Paul in many ways (see Acts 18:1–3, 24–28; Rom. 16:3–4; 1 Cor. 16:19). Now they were in Ephesus helping Timothy with his ministry. It is wonderful when God's people do their work regardless of who their leader is.

Onesiphorus (2 Tim. 4:19) and his household we met in 2 Timothy 1.

Erastus (2 Tim. 4:20) might be the treasurer of Corinth (Rom. 16:23); and he might be the same man who ministered with Timothy in Macedonia (Acts 19:22).

Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20) from Ephesus was a friend of Tychicus (Acts 20:4), and the man whose presence with Paul helped to incite that riot in Jerusalem (Acts 21:28–29). He had been serving at Miletus, but now he was ill. Why did Paul not heal him? Apparently not every sick person is supposed to be miraculously healed.

The other people mentioned (2 Tim. 4:21) are unknown to us, but certainly not to the Lord.

"Grace be with you" (2 Tim. 4:22) was Paul's personal farewell, used at the end of his letters as a "trademark" that the letter was not a forgery.

The Bible does not record the final days of Paul. Tradition tells us that he was found guilty and sentenced to die. He was probably taken outside the city and beheaded.

But Timothy and the other devoted believers carried on the work! As John Wesley used to say, "God buries His workmen, but His work goes on." You and I must be faithful so that (if the Lord does not return soon) future generations may hear the gospel and have the opportunity to be saved.

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