

PAUL'S PASTORAL LETTERS

The next three letters are different from all those we have read so far. They are written to individuals, and not to a congregation. They are known as 'pastoral' (shepherd) letters because they were written to guide two young leaders of the flock. Timothy and Titus were both willing helpers of the Apostle, and we have met them already when we looked at the book of Acts. Paul had often entrusted them with important assignments, to act in his stead. These epistles are the words of a team leader to his assistants – a great example of how to encourage others.

1 Timothy

The third verse of the first chapter tells us that as Paul writes, he is in Macedonia, and Timothy has been left behind in Ephesus to tidy up unfinished business. This combination does not fit any of the journeys in Acts. It probably belongs to a time after the end of Acts chapter 28, when the apostle was released from prison to resume his travels.

It sounds as though the congregation at Ephesus was being distracted by Jewish Christians who argued endlessly over trivialities. They delved into genealogies (as if it matters who you are descended from!). They set themselves up as interpreters of the details of the Law of Moses, but missed the real point of the Law, which was to produce love in human hearts. So Paul lays down some ground rules for conduct in the church. He says it is important to pray for those who rule over us, so that we may continue to worship in peace. He says the brothers should do the praying, while sisters should dress modestly, and not take a teaching role. In the beginning of the third chapter, he writes an imaginary job application for an elder of the congregation (must be a good teacher; disciplinarian; respected in the

community; hospitable; not divorced, etc.). Then he does one for a deacon (this term is obscure – it may refer to a trainee elder). To improve the standards in the congregation, he is saying, you need to start at the top. Men teaching celibacy or special diets or fitness courses, or wasting time on myths and tales of demons, were to be shunned.

This responsibility for transforming attitudes was a tall order for Timothy, who was timid by nature, and his mentor encouraged him to teach by example as the best way to convince people he was right.

There had been cases of misapplying church funds at Ephesus that needed correction. We know there was no government social support system in the first century for people who were poor, such as women whose husbands had died young. So it was usual to make welfare payments to widows out of the church collections that were taken on the first day of each week. In chapter five Paul lays down rules about eligibility. Only if there were no children or grandchildren to support a widow should she receive a payment, and then she must be over 60, and have a good reputation (1 Timothy 5:9, 10).

These are all practical issues, and it is interesting to see how the same sort of challenges exist today.

The last chapter returns to the subject of slaves, who must respect their masters, especially if they were Christian ones. It also warns of the danger of devoting time to money and possessions, with that immortal phrase "*the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils*" (1 Timothy 6:10) - particularly appropriate in today's materialistic society. Instead, Paul charges Timothy that he must guard well the deposit entrusted to him by his absent lord (shades here of the Parable of the Talents), and

encourage people to be rich, not in stocks and shares, but in good works.

2 Timothy

The second letter to Timothy is sad. It is the last letter we have that Paul wrote, just before he was executed. The Emperor had turned against the Christians. Paul had been arrested, and brought to Rome a second time, as a ringleader of the hated community. He was waiting for his court hearing to come up, and he was pretty sure of the outcome. He desperately wanted to see his young friend again before he died, and there was not much time.

The remarkable feature of this letter is the calm confidence of the great apostle in the reward that lay beyond the Roman sword that would end his life. Outwardly, his life had been a failure – the proud young lawyer with the world at his feet had been reduced to a damp prison cell with no possessions but a few scrolls, and death on the walls. But his faith rises inexorably above his circumstances. His Lord had conquered death.

“... our Saviour Christ Jesus abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me” (2 Timothy 1:10-12).

The aged apostle spends the first two chapters encouraging Timothy to be brave in this time of persecution. He was not to be ashamed of the gospel, but stand up and give his testimony. Nothing is gained without effort, he reminds him. Soldiers on campaign endure discomfort. Athletes train hard to win. Farmers perspire as they prepare the ground for the future crop. So we must accept suffering as our duty, and remember the reward is worth the pain. Sadly many Paul once trusted had disowned

him when the persecution began to bite, but he commends Onesiphorus, a brother from Ephesus. This old friend had taken his life in his hands to search out the particular prison in the sprawling metropolis where Paul was being held.

“May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me ...” (2 Timothy 1:16).

Paul warns that in “*the last days*” society would break down, and imposters would appear in the church. He instructs Timothy, as one of the new generation of leaders, to hold on to what he had been taught, and to take the scriptures as his guide, for he says,

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

In what are the last recorded words of Paul, he again exhorts Timothy to fulfil his role as a leader, preaching and teaching firmly and with patience. He himself was about to bow out. His words bring tears to the eyes –

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7,8).

If only we can speak like that when we come to the end of our days! But time was running out. “*Do your best to come to me soon*”, he urges. Whether Timothy did, we cannot know. Tradition tells that at his second hearing Paul was condemned to die, and on the appointed day led out outside the city boundary to the place of execution. As a Roman citizen he was entitled to a quick and

relatively painless death. He sleeps in the dust, awaiting “that Day” when he will receive the crown of life from the Master he served so well.

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