

+ 2 Timothy 3:10-4:5 + Be Faithful to the Word! + 7th Sunday After Pentecost + 19 July 2009 +

My name is Paul and I am a prisoner for Christ Jesus. I have served the Lord as his apostle for about thirty years. At one time, I could've been considered the most orthodox of Jews. My family could trace our lineage to the tribe of Benjamin. I studied under one of the greatest rabbis of my generation and belonged to the strictest sect of Judaism—the Pharisees. I was so zealous for the Law of Moses that I even persecuted Christians, but Christ Jesus changed all that one day on the road to Damascus.

The Lord sent me out as his apostle to the Jews and non-Jews to proclaim to them the good news of Christ crucified for the sins of the world. Jesus had said about me, ***“This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”*** Of course, he was right. I've spent thirty years taking the Gospel to the Jews and Gentiles and even Caesar himself. It hasn't been easy, though, just as Christ had promised. I've suffered a great deal for him. For Christ I have been imprisoned in dark dungeons and under house arrest. I have been flogged, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, and subject to riots. I have been in danger from bandits, my own countrymen, Gentiles, and false brothers. I have been in danger in the city, country, and at sea. I've gone hungry and in need. Plus the Lord allowed a ***“thorn in the flesh...to torment me...”***

Now I sit chained like a criminal in a dungeon cell in the Mamartine prison here in the city of Rome—worn, cold, and alone. Some have deserted me. Others I have sent away on missions. My appearance in court before Emperor Nero did not go well so I expect to die a martyr's death by beheading...all for Christ. Yet you know all this because I wrote about it to my dear friend, my dear son, Timothy. I wrote to him from this jail cell out of loving concern for him and for the Church of which you are a part.

You see, ***“there will be difficult times in the last days.”*** You tell me. Does this sound like the times in which you live? Do you perhaps even see some of these characteristics in yourself? I wrote, ***“People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power...these men oppose the truth—men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected.”*** How hard it is to live in a culture where such a description is the norm! How hard it is to be a Christian who faithfully follows the will of our Lord Jesus! I'm sure you can match this description to your own time, as I could to the times in which I lived. Things haven't changed, right? They've only gotten worse as we near the Last Day. What's even sadder is how much such a description describes people like you and me who call themselves Christian, but who daily fall into those sinful traps.

The Lord in his grace made it possible for me to be a model for Timothy and, I pray, for you too. I wrote, ***“You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured.”*** Now I wasn't boasting in myself, but in God's grace. Only by God's grace was it possible that I, who once persecuted Christians, could teach his inspired truth as I once wrote, ***“When you received the word from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God.”***

Only by God's grace was it possible for me to practice what I preach and show the powerful influence of God's truth in my life. Only by God's grace did my life follow the plan and direction of God as opposed to a meaningless serving of self. Only by God's grace could I be ***“sure of what we hope for...certain of what we do not see...”*** Only by God's grace could I patiently endure adversity, persecution, and suffering. For example, in Antioch, the citizens threw Barnabas and me out of the city. In Iconium, we were forced to flee when they wanted to stone us to death. In Lystra, I actually was stoned by the mobs and dragged out of the city left for dead. Still the Lord in his grace ***“rescued me from all of them.”*** He will rescue me from this final imprisonment as well, but with the final deliverance of death as Christ Jesus brings me home to his heavenly kingdom.

Now don't think my persecution was an isolated case! God promises that it will be a reality for all Christians as I told Timothy, ***“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.”*** Jesus had predicted this when he said, ***“No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”*** The word in our language for “persecute” has the idea of being pursued, of being oppressed and harassed. Now unlike here in 1st Century Rome, your Christian faith is not illegal in your country, but still it's difficult to be a Christian. In fact, it's getting more difficult as more people grow cold and hardened to the truth. Persecution comes because Christ is preached and Christ is offensive to the sinful nature of every human being.

Maybe it's not an executioner's sword, but the confused comments of family members who wonder why you “changed” or the cold rejection of those you thought were friends or the behind-your-back snickers of co-workers, all

because you follow and proclaim Christ just as I did. Trust me, you'll be tempted to compromise with error, to let error slide when the sometimes hard truth of God's Word isn't convenient at work, at home, out in the community or even at church. You'll be tempted to go along with the crowd and make life easier on yourself, but know this! One little compromise with error, one little cooperation with wickedness will only lead to greater compromise and cooperation. The bad will only get worse until before you know it, you have fallen into Satan's trap and fallen away from Christ and the Christian faith.

So how do you remain faithful to Christ? How do you not lose the precious gift you have received even in the face of persecution? How did I endure? Be faithful to the Word of God! Listen to what I told Timothy, ***"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."***

What is it you have learned from infancy that gives you the strong conviction to stand firm in the faith? You have learned about Christ Jesus. You have learned through the Holy Scriptures that you do deserve God's wrath and punishment because far too often you have gone along with the society around you, have compromised with error or cooperated with wickedness.

At the same time, through the Holy Scriptures you have gained a wisdom that is available nowhere else—the wisdom of the knowledge of God's grace as revealed in our Savior Jesus Christ. Through Scripture you have learned how God sent his Son out of pure, undeserving, undying love to cleanse you of all the guilt you have earned for yourself. Through Scripture you have learned how Christ Jesus lived a life perfectly obeying his Father's holy will from conception to adulthood for you. Through Scripture you have learned how Jesus also gave up his life as the one and only ransom for your sins on the cross and then triumphed over death to seal that forgiveness for all time.

You are convinced because you have had faithful teachers. Timothy had his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice who taught him from little on about the promised Messiah, whom they later found out was Jesus. You have your own examples of those who took the time ***"to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus"*** by teaching you the Word of God. Maybe it was your parents who taught you about Jesus' forgiveness as a little toddler. Maybe it was a Sunday School teacher who patiently taught you in your school years. Maybe it was a pastor who counseled you in a time of darkness in your life. Whoever it was, the Lord used their faithful example to teach you to remain faithful to him and to his Word even in the face of suffering or sorrow or tragedy or painful persecution for your Christian faith.

Through it all, though, the Word of God remains effective. It makes an impact on hearts. Yes, the message of Christ crucified causes offense and often leads to negative reactions, but remember what I told Timothy. ***"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, for convicting, for straightening out, for training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."*** The Word of God is always going to have an effect. It's always going to make an impact. Just look at your own life. See how the Word of God has impacted your life and continues to impact your life so you have everything you need to carry out the task of serving your Lord even in the face of bitter harassment for your Christian faith. At the same time, the God who promises persecution in the life of a Christian also promises deliverance in his own good time. Our God is faithful and will one day come to ***"judge the living and the dead"***. He will bring to be with him all who have remained faithful to his Word.

My service to the Lord is nearly at an end. My time to stand before his judgment seat is coming soon. I look forward to it, not because I was such a great missionary, but because by God's grace, I have remained faithful to the Word. Your service here continues for as long as our faithful God wills it.

Your faithfulness to the Word is all the more important because the time has come ***"when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they...gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They...turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."*** Don't follow the endless ***"myths"*** out there that seem more pleasing to the ear than the real truth of Scripture, instead keep your head and be faithful to the Word. Live in that Word, so you can proclaim that Word at any time. That Word is the only source of truth in a world without absolute truth. That Word is the only source of life in a world dying around you. In that Word, your faithful God connects you to Christ Jesus your Savior. In that Word, you know ***"The Lord will rescue you and me from every evil attack and will bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen."***