

Weakness, Suffering and the Weight of Apostolic Preaching

PART I: THE WEAKNESS OF TIMOTHY AND THE KINDNESS OF GOD

The first thematic strand of three that runs through the book of II Timothy is the subject of Timothy's weakness and immaturity. In this installment we'll look at how Paul speaks into a young man's brokenness and calls him forth into maturity. It's an extremely relevant subject (again, especially for those who, like Timothy, have been called to the ministry).

This subject gets the most 'airtime' in 1:3-2:26. This is the section we'll be dealing with here (which is essentially the first two chapters). The way we'll look at this section and this subject is by observing 3 of Paul's statements over Timothy's life in God and then one command that is calculated to get Timothy from where he is to where he's called to be. And all of this is meant to serve as a sign post for us who have been called into the ministry but have backed off from the level of consecration and focus to which He has called us.

THREE OF PAUL'S AFFIRMATIONS OVER TIMOTHY'S LIFE IN GOD

In light of Timothy's profound weakness, timidity and shame, and in light of the way he had backed off from the call of God on his life (all of which we'll see in a moment), Paul begins to call him out of timid passivity and into fervency. He did this by affirming three things about Timothy's life: His (1) Sincerity, (2) Immaturity and (3) His Need of Supernatural Strength to Resist the Temptation of Quitting Under the Pressures from Within and Without. I love this book because I feel as though Paul is writing it directly to me. Those of us who have heard the call of the Lord to lay down our lives for the Gospel MUST hear these things and hear them as from the Lord Himself – for they are His thoughts and words over all of us.

First, he declares Timothy's faith to be **sincere**.

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 as well. (II Timothy 1:5)

Before expounding on the 'crisis of faith' that Timothy's timidity and passivity produces, he affirms the glorious truth that underneath Timothy's brokenness and inability to remain steadfast is authenticity and sincerity. Beneath our brokenness is not rebellion and a hopeless struggle with forces greater than He who abides in us. Beneath our brokenness is sincere and genuine faith. Yes it's weak and immature! Yes it's imperfect! Yes it's fledgling! But none of those characteristics of our love and commitment to the Lord negate our sincerity. Hearing the Lord declare us to be sincere in the midst of our struggle is invaluable. Feeling His delight in the genuineness of our faith in the dark night of the weakness of our faith is one of the greatest of all pleasures. Why did Paul start here? – Because this is the gateway into maturity and fervency: Understanding that weak love is still genuine; it's just weak and in need of nurturing.

Second, he declares Timothy's faith to be **immature** (as displayed through his fear of suffering for the Gospel and his perplexity concerning Paul's imprisonment). There isn't one straightforward statement in the text that leads us to conclude that Paul was speaking into Timothy's immaturity. Rather, it's by

observing Paul's collective words of exhortations that we come to see Timothy's immaturity as a dominant subject within the letter. The strength of his exhortations, and what he is exhorting him into make it clear what he was calling him out of. These 3 verses demonstrate the way Paul is dealing with Timothy's immaturity:

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit **not of fear** but of power and love and self-control. Therefore **do not be ashamed** of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share in suffering for the Gospel by the power of God... (II Timothy 1:6-8)

The structure of the sentences makes it clear what's going on: (1) He reminds him to revive the flames of consecration and zeal that was sparked in years past. (2) He tells him that fear is not from God or a product of the fire that was ignited (note the conjunction word "For..."). (3) He tells him "therefore" to resist shame as he stewards a fiery spirit and an unswerving commitment to the Gospel. In other words, "Timothy, when the Lord first set you apart, he ignited a fire in your belly. Fear and shame are not from Him. Resist these things! They are illegitimate! Stoke the fire that is dwindling! May it rage and consume your timidity that you could might give a faithful witness to the Lord and suffer the opposition gloriously!"

By beseeching him to resist fear and shame he was exposing his immaturity and timidity. Fear and shame are the products of immature faith. Why was fear and shame the two issues being addressed? – Because of the opposition to the Gospel. Timothy was fearful because of Paul's imprisonment and the prospect of his own and was carrying shame for being identified with such a despised movement. Timothy felt ashamed because his ministry was provoking scorn, rejection and persecution from his community. He was guilty before God and his father in the faith of stewarding feelings of deep shame for that which is sinful to be ashamed of: giving faithful witness to Jesus.

Oh how pressingly relevant this is for a generation of young ministers and missionaries who have blunted the blade of the Gospel to maintain their emotional equilibrium. We need the Holy Spirit to address these issues of fear and shame in our hearts if we're to embrace the call to ministry in all faithfulness and consecration. For as we'll see in the next installment, suffering, persecution and rejection are all integral parts of the apostolic calling. A radical commitment to the Gospel invariably brings suffering upon us. This was Paul's main message of this letter. And yet our generation of placid preachers have embraced the same timidity that Paul was rebuking Timothy for. We must see ministry rightly! An apostolic apprehension of the Gospel produces suffering. If it does not, it is not apostolic. This is not to say that we should expect complete wholesale rejection. No! This is to say that the Gospel polarizes humanity and demands of them an extreme response – whether good or evil.

And third, he beseeches Timothy to **resist disqualifying himself** from the ministry on account of his immaturity and weakness. And then he beckons him to **press into fervency and maturity** on account of God's grace and power that has been given to him as a gift but set aside because of fear and timidity.

Therefore **do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner**, but **share in suffering** for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, **not because of our works** but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our

Savior Christ Jesus, who 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. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (II Timothy 1:8-14)

The grounds and basis of Paul's invitation to Timothy – and God's invitation to us – to flee from timidity, fear and shame is the grace and power of God that is given to Timothy – and us – as a gift because of the shed blood of Jesus and “not because of our works” (1:9).

In 1:8 Paul appeals to God's power in beckoning Timothy to “not be ashamed” of fierce opposition to his ministry from within (shame, fear, condemnation, etc.) and without (persecution, imprisonment, martyrdom, etc.). He says: “...do not be ashamed (!)...but share in suffering for the Gospel (!) by the power of God.” Timothy's hope of being steadfast and bold in the face of opposition – from within and without – rested solely in the reservoir of God's power. Paul appeals to Timothy to draw from the Lord's power and to abandon Timothy's. This is why in 1:7 he says that God's gift to Timothy was “power;” power to eclipse and swallow up Timothy's fear, timidity and brokenness.

And in 1:9 and 2:1 he appeals to God's grace in beckoning Timothy to be “strengthened” and brought forth in maturity and fervency. In 1:9 Paul connects “the grace of God” with the “God who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our own works but because of His own purpose and grace.” And in 2:1 he says “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus...” As we'll see in a moment, grace saturates the logic and exhortation of Paul to Timothy.

Make sure to note this: Both the “power” and the “grace” are “gifts” that were “given” to Timothy during a time of prayer when Paul “laid his hands on” him and ignited a “flame.” All of these propositions connected together deserve much attention.

FAN INTO FLAMES THE GIFT OF GOD WITHIN YOU

Many of us have had a II Timothy 1:6-7 moment when we were “given” and “entrusted” a gift of grace, power and fire. And many of us have then had a collision with our weakness and immaturity just like Timothy. And we need fathers like Paul to come around us and demand of us obedience to the high calling to which we were called.

I sense that the Lord is beginning to awaken the fatherly discipline of young Timothy's all across the earth that have disqualified themselves because of their immaturity and brokenness. Their immaturity and brokenness is very real. But what Paul is saying to Timothy is that it doesn't disqualify them from the high calling. We need to understand that Paul juxtaposed Timothy's sincerity (1:3-4) with his immaturity. That is, just because he was immature doesn't mean that he was insincere. Most people misunderstand this and back off from that which they've been called to.

Paul's words were calculated to escort Timothy out of compromise and into fullness. And in 1:6 we read the exhortation: “Fan into flame the gift of God that is within you.” Some translations say: “Stir up the gift of God that is within you.” The point is this: By grace God had entrusted Timothy a calling and provided the grace to fulfil that calling. And underneath that calling and all around that calling was grace

– saving grace. In other words, saving grace secured Timothy’s position of privilege before God relationally, prophetic grace secured Timothy’s ministerial calling and empowering grace secured Timothy’s ability to fulfil that ministerial calling. The heart of Paul’s exhortation to “fan into flames” the gift of God within him is found in 1:9 when he reminds Timothy that:

“...God...has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began...”

Paul’s exhortation to renounce passivity, timidity and fear was grounded in the concept of grace. In this context I would define grace as “unmerited favour.” Jesus’ death and resurrection has secured for us a position of privilege that can never be undermined: and surely not by our brokenness. See, Timothy wasn’t in rebellion – Timothy was in weakness and immaturity! And there is a profound difference between the two. The reality that God’s commitment to us reaches from eternity past to eternity future settles our hearts in the present as we navigate through the dark night and stormy seas of our spiritual, emotional, mental and physical frailty.

THE GREAT CHALLENGE FOR THIS GENERATION OF LABORERS

The greatest battle that those who are called to a high calling in God must fight isn’t the battle for humility – it’s the battle for endurance. The greatest temptation for those who have been called to a high calling in God is not to be puffed up with pride because of the greatness of the calling but not quitting because of the pressures that come because of the calling. The pressures involved – from within and without – are so extremely intense that the temptation to quit is the greatest temptation on the table.

We don’t know what Timothy did with Paul’s invitation to deeper consecration and focus. We don’t know if he pressed through and laid hold of the grace and power of God. We don’t know if he suffered gloriously with Paul for the Gospel. But whether Timothy fought the good fight or not, let us heed these words and press on to maturity.

And let weakness, brokenness and immaturity not be our great stumbling block but the great doorway into the depths of experiencing God’s kindness and goodness. Let us hear our Father affirming the sincerity of our faith and love as He calls us into deeper levels of consecration and maturity. Let us remember always that His grace saved us, His grace called us and His grace empowers us. Let us remember that we have no right to disqualify ourselves before God when He went to such great lengths to qualify us in spite of us (Col. 1:12). And let us fan into flame the fire the gift that He has given us who have been called to the ministry.