

February 16, 2025

THE PATHS TRAVELED BY THOSE AROUND US AND OUR RESPONSE

2 Timothy 4:9-22

(8 of 8 in a series through 2 Timothy)

One of the most captivating stories (which I've referenced before) occurred on February 26, 1852. On that evening, a number of British soldiers stood side by side on a sinking ship instead of fleeing to their safety. As each second passed, the likelihood of their survival decreased, and yet they continued to stand, unmoved by the near certainty of death. The reason for the tragic situation is that the ship had struck a rock which ripped through its hull, and there was nothing that could be done to save it. But, sadly, these British soldiers weren't the only ones on board. There were women and children as well. What made matters worse was that there were only a few lifeboats, and mechanical issues prevented even some of them from being lowered. Therefore, they put the women and children on the few boats available and sent them away to safety.

At this point, the men began readying themselves for what they anticipated would happen next. There was still a bit of room on some of the lifeboats, and no doubt soon the captain would yell, "Every man for himself," and the race would be on. But that didn't happen. Instead of yelling for the men to race to safety, the captain drew his sword and ordered them to stand firm. The captain recognized that everything they'd done to save the women and children could be undone in an instant. Should the men flee the sinking ship in that moment, they'd certainly reach the lifeboats. But because there wasn't enough capacity for all of them aboard these small boats, the men's efforts to get onboard would cause them to capsize, and the women and children would end up drowning. Therefore, the captain ordered the men to remain exactly where they were until the moment he believed that the boats were a safe enough distance away that they couldn't be reached.

Therefore, in obedience to the captain's orders, the men stood. They stood together, each drawing strength from the other to do what perhaps none of them could find the strength to do alone. They stood still, with each passing second making their death more and more certain. Finally, when the boats were deemed a safe distance away, the captain released the men to flee. Most of them drown or were eaten by sharks. A few survived, which is how we know their story.¹

I thought of that story again this week, being struck by the thought of how hard it would have been for these men to stand still, knowing that as each second ticked by, the likelihood of their deaths was increasing. And yet, how much strength they would have drawn from looking around them and seeing their brothers just as committed to standing firm. It's hard to overestimate the blessing of being about to walk through times of difficult obedience with others at your side.

¹ <https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Women-Children-First/>.

That's actually what makes this closing scene in Paul's second letter to Timothy so brutal. Not only does Paul write from a Roman prison cell, but he is largely alone. And so in this closing words, he asks Timothy to come and visit him, bringing some parchments and his cloak as winter arrives. But Paul's closing words—the last recorded words of his we have in the NT—aren't just a request for Timothy to come to him. It's also a report on what several people who have interacted with Paul along the way have done. He tells Timothy about those who have deserted him, who have been faithful, who have opposed his work, and on and on.

In some ways, it could be easy to ignore this section. It can read like Paul has already addressed all of the important stuff, and he's just giving Timothy some updates on life and making sure he gets that cloak before winter comes. But what we can see if we read through these verses closely is that Paul is giving us a picture of what he's gone through relationally in these days. Perhaps more importantly, he's showing us what his response to each of these things is. And knowing that Paul's experience here is by no means odd or out of the ordinary, it reminds us of what we may well face relationally in our own lives and how we can respond as well. So that's how I want to approach this. Let's consider all the ways we can anticipate believers and unbelievers reacting in life around us and how we should respond. Of these, first I want to note that we will see believers walk in faithfulness, so we should bind ourselves to them.

We will see believers walk in faithfulness, so we should bind ourselves to them

One of the first things we see here is that Paul is reaching out to brothers whom he has bound his heart to. First, he reaches out to his faithful son in the faith, Timothy. He opens this section, writing, "Do your best to come to me soon" (v. 9). And if our response to this is to think, "Well, that's kind, isn't it? He wants to see Timothy one more time," we may be underestimating Paul's situation.

We've noted throughout this letter that Paul is in a Roman prison awaiting execution, but we may be picturing something like an American prison, where the prisoners must not be treated cruelly and are provided with certain benefits. But that's not the case. You'd likely be chained and resting on a cold stone floor without ventilation. Things could become damp and moldy, leaving the prisoners sick and some dying in prison before their execution was even carried out. Also, during the winter months, they weren't provided source of heat or blankets.² So this could be a miserable place with nothing to pass the time of one's miserable existence.

Therefore, Paul is not afraid to reach out to Timothy with whom he's bound himself. He urges him to come to him soon, bring others with him, and to bring his cloak, books, and parchments. The books and parchments could be a reference to the OT Scriptures or materials for letters that Paul hoped to write. The cloak is obviously for Paul to survive the winter if indeed he makes it that long. That's why Paul exhorts Timothy in verse 21, saying, "Do your best to come before winter."

² See Denny Burk's ESV commentary.

Now, what's easily overlooked here but shouldn't be is the connectedness with other believers that Paul shows here. He reaches out to Timothy as he's bound himself to him as a dear son. He notes that Luke is with him as well. Then he tells us that Crescens, Titus, and Tychicus are out on assignment, as Paul sees them as an extension of his ministry. He'll end our text speaking bondly of his bond with Prisca, Aquila, Onesiphorus's family, and others. But what it highlights is that Paul has spent his life yoking himself with other believers so that now, in the last days of his life, he can call on some to be with him and minister to him while others he can send out to minister on his behalf.

This is a picture of what the Christian life is supposed to be, and it's one reason why church membership is so important. The believer is never meant to be isolated from a local body of believers. Rather, we yoke ourselves together, receive from one another, minister to one another, walk with one another, and on and on.

But simply joining a church is not enough. Here's what I mean. You can be a member of this church and remain on the periphery. You can. You come just enough on Sunday mornings not to get any pastor reaching out to you, and you probably won't raise much of a ruckus. We won't discipline you. You'll be fine. But you'll not hear your brothers' and sisters' needs as they share them on Sunday nights so that you can walk with them and aid them. You'll not know how they're wrestling to walk in faithfulness to the Scripture as they share with their small groups so that you might pray for them, learn from them, and encourage them. And you'll not be forming relationships that you need for the day when you need to reach out to them. Your heart will not be bound to them, which is God's design. So, yoke yourself to others faithful believers who'll walk alongside of you, lift you up, and be lifted up by you. This is the Lord's design for his people.

But sadly, that's not all we'll see. We'll also see professing believers turn away, but we must not be deterred.

We will see professing believers turn away, but we must not be deterred

I noted that the first thing Paul does as he wraps up this letter is to tell Timothy to do his best to come see him soon. That makes sense, as we've already noted. What we might not expect is that immediately after this exhortation Paul mentions being deserted by someone. He writes in verse 10, "For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." Now, he'll mention in that same verse that Titus has gone to Dalmatia and Crescens to Galatia, but those are different. Each of these men are going out on assignment. They're going to carry out the work of the Lord. That's not what Demas has done. It seems, he's walked away, loving the things of this age more than he longs for the age to come. But why is this such a big deal to Paul?

The answer, I think, lies in seeing that Demas is mentioned elsewhere. For example, as Paul wraps up his letter to Philemon, he writes, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers" (Philemon

23-24). And again, in Colossians 4:14, as Paul wraps up that letter, he writes, “Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.”

So, when Paul speaks of being deserted by Demas, who was pulled away by his love for this present world, he wasn’t simply talking about someone he’d heard about third hand or who meant very little to him. Demas was part of Paul’s missionary team. He was one in Paul’s inner circle. This might be the equivalent of one of our elders deserting us, in love with this present world. This is a painful reality to Paul, and it’s no doubt why it’s the first thing he mentions after exhorting Timothy to come see him.

But I also want you to note something else. Paul immediately asks Timothy to bring Mark to him because “he is very useful to me for ministry” (v. 11). Now, I’ll note Mark specifically in a second, but for now notice that Paul is still talking about his ministry. What this means is that he’s been dealt a very hard blow in that someone (most likely a close friend and ally) who was in his inner circle has turned away from following the Lord, and Paul’s response is to keep running the race and keep being faithful to the ministry the Lord has before him.

Our response must be the same. We will watch professing believers fall away. It may even be some who walked closely with us, taught us, or poured into us. But when it happens, we must not be shaken and deterred. We simply need to recognize that this will happen. Some, like Demas, will show themselves more in love with this present age than the age to come, but we must keep our eyes on eternity and keep walking in obedience to our Lord. However, we will also see believers stumble but then grow, so we should pray and pour into them.

We will see believers stumble but then grow, so we must pray and pour into them

The second half of verse 11 is an astounding acknowledgment from Paul. After asking Timothy to do everything possible to come see him soon, he adds, “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”

In isolation, that verse isn’t astounding. Many people are useful to others in ministry. I feel out recommendation forms all the time, affirming that people will be useful in a ministry that they’re undertaking. But this isn’t a comment in isolation. We know the background.

In Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas were a missionary team. And they were tight. It was Barnabas who helped bring Paul—a man who once wanted the death of Christians—into the inner circle of the other apostles. But then they had what Luke labels “a sharp disagreement” between the two of them, and it was over Mark—this individual referenced in verse 11. The issue was that Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them on the next leg of their missionary journey, but Paul didn’t. And the reason Paul didn’t is because Mark had departed at one point.

Now, we don’t have all the details of this, but it seemed that at one point Mark had been with Paul and decided, this wasn’t for him and had gone back home. In Paul’s eyes, he had stumbled to the point of showing himself not to be reliable. And the disagreement was so strong between

Paul and Barnabas over Mark that they decided that they would split up—Paul would take Silas, and Barnabas would take Mark. Yet now, years later, Paul is saying to Timothy, “Get Mark and bring him with you, *for he is very useful to me for ministry.*” What happened?

What happened, it seems, is that Mark’s stumble that Paul saw as proving Mark’s unreliability hadn’t been the last word. Barnabas had continued to invest in him so that he drew and developed endurance and strength. In fact, he’d grown so much so since that moment that Paul wants Mark at his side in his final days because he judges him “very useful” for Paul’s ministry.

We will see this as well. Sometimes believers will disappoint you. But don’t let your response be to write them off. Pray for them. Hope all things for them. Keep investing in them if you can (as Barnabas did), and perhaps you’ll see them grow. No doubt people have done that with me as I’ve stumbled along the way, and I know that I’ve been in that role for others. There have been some I can think of trying to pour into along the way that at points I thought, “This isn’t getting anywhere.” And now they are some of the most valuable church members I could imagine. So don’t let another’s stumble lead you to be hopeless. Instead, hope all things, begin to pray, keep investing, and see if you don’t see a turnaround as we see with Mark here. Also, we will see unbelievers attempt to thwart God’s Word, so be on guard.

We will see unbelievers attempt to thwart God’s Word, so we must be on guard

Paul tells this to Timothy in verses 14-15, writing, “Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.”

The gospel will have its enemies in this world, there is no doubt about it. We don’t know the specifics of Alexander the coppersmith. It could be the same Alexander whom Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 1:20 when he speaks of “Hymanaeus and Alexander, whom [he had] handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” But actually I would bet it’s another, which is why Paul felt the need to designate him “Alexander the coppersmith,” which may be Paul saying, “Not to be confused with the other Alexander you and I know.”

But regardless of who this particular Alexander was or how specifically he opposed the gospel message, he represents what will always be with us. That is to say, every generation will have its “Alexanders,” people who oppose the teaching of the gospel and God’s Word. And what should be our response? Paul tells Timothy to, “Beware of him.”

In other words, he’s telling him not to be ignorant and to prepare himself for this opposition that will come at him. Be on guard. I’m saying the same thing to us. Don’t be caught off guard when we’re opposed for teaching Christ’s Word or obeying his commands. It will come. So let’s beware. Let’s prepare ourselves now to stand and not be shaken, to press on and not be hindered, to keep obeying and not be turned aside. And, finally, we will see believers disappoint us, but we can rest in God’s faithfulness.

We will see believers disappoint us, but we can rest in God's faithfulness

After his mention of Alexander, Paul writes in verses 16-17a, "At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it."

I'm not able to recreate all of Paul's hearings and imprisonments, but apparently there was a legal hearing that he had prior to this moment. Perhaps it led to one of his earlier imprisonments. Regardless of when, Paul notes that at that defense, there were no believers who showed up to stand with him. Perhaps some of them were just going about ministry in other places. Perhaps some didn't have the courage to stand with one who might be sentenced to death. But for whatever reasons, Paul was all alone. He was deserted by all.

It's hard to read this text and not see this as a disappointment to Paul. He didn't want to be alone. It doesn't mean that he saw their desertion of him as the worst possible sins they might commit. After all, he asks the Lord not to charge it against them. But it's also true that he wouldn't ask the Lord not to charge it against them if he didn't think there was something there. In other words, no one would say, "Lord, don't charge it against my neighbor that they made dinner for me." You only say that if there is something they've done that is, at best, disappointing. Paul, simply put, wishes that he hadn't been alone. His experience is a reminder that believers will, on occasion, disappoint us.

But note his response. He notes that though these believers disappointed him, the Lord didn't. He was faithful. He didn't abandon Paul in that moment but stood by Paul and strengthened him. And this wasn't the first time that the Lord showed Paul's faithfulness, as he references being rescued from the lion's mouth, which is to say, from an earlier time when he could have been sentenced to death.

Now, someone might push against Paul here, saying, "The Lord was faithful to you then because he delivered you from being sentenced to death, but now you're in prison and will be executed." But even here Paul sees the Lord's faithfulness, writing in verse 18, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen."

Do you see what Paul is saying? The Lord rescued him at times from death, and even when death does come for Paul, God's deliverance will continue then as well because death won't be the end for Paul. The Lord will bring him into his kingdom. As Paul says elsewhere, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." Paul may face disappointments from others, but he knows the Lord will always be faithful, even in death.

And so it is with us. I wish I could tell you that believers will never disappoint you, but they will. But I can promise you that in those moments, you can minister to your soul by reminding yourself that the Lord will always be faithful to you—in this age and in the age to come. Not even death

itself will be able to thwart his faithfulness. And why would we doubt that in light of the fact that he gave his Son to live, die, and be raised so that we might be his forgiven children? So let's rejoice in his faithfulness now as we come to the table. Amen.