

February 9, 2025

PASSING THE BATON TO THE NEXT GENERATION

2 Timothy 4:1-8

*(7 of 8 in a series through 2 Timothy)*

I grew up in such a rural area that it felt like I was a generation behind others my age who grew up in other parts of the nation. We had a party telephone line, which meant that you'd pick up your phone sometime to find that someone was on the line, but it was no one in your house. It was the neighbor, who shared your line with you. We had a huge antenna on our house so that we might pick up some television channels, but there were only three that were broadcast anyway, so the only time I was drawn to watch television in my childhood was on Saturday mornings. And even then, you had a wait for programming to start. I remember more than once getting up on Saturday mornings with anticipation of watching cartoons, only to turn on the tv and see colored vertical bars and nothing more.

The effect of this is that most of my time was spent playing outside. I'd create a world where army figures were going to war, or I was trying to speed away from bad guys who were chasing after me. My mom would say that I wore out a path on the hill that ran around the back part of our house on my three-wheeler. But what else are you going to do when bad guys are chasing you?

And perhaps it was growing up that way that led me to be a bit on the melodramatic side, but I have to confess I am. Even to this day, I play out imaginative scenarios in my mind where I'm in a difficult or challenging situation, and I think through how I would respond. More often than I should, perhaps, I've played out what I would say if I received a fatal diagnosis and knew my time was short. What would I say to Lili and the kids? What would I say to you all as one of your pastors? Well, as I've played out that scene in my head, it's rare that it doesn't include a reference to our text this morning. And the reason that's the case is because in these verses Paul does just what I've been describing.

By that I don't mean that Paul has received some fatal diagnosis from his doctor. But he does know that he's about to die. He explicitly says that in verse 6, writing, "The time of my departure has come." Obviously this has been the case with Paul throughout the entirety of this letter. He's known it from the moment he first took up his pen to write. But now, as he's wrapping up he wants to say clearly what no doubt Timothy has known even prior to receiving this letter from his beloved mentor. And the reason Paul brings it up now is because he wants to give his final charge to Timothy. It is Paul's moment to pass the baton in an intentional way to his protégé, and so he tells Timothy very clearly in these verses—in the stongest of terms—what he must be about, even after Paul is gone.

And, because this is written directly to Timothy in his role as a pastor, it is indeed perfectly suitable to apply this word to me and the brothers who serve alongside of me as pastors here. It's also easy to directly apply this to any who aspire to be pastors. What Paul says to Timothy

here must be heeded by you. But, as I've noted before, it's also crucial for us to take note of this as a church. And here's the reason.

When you look at churches that have gone astray, it's ultimately because of the church itself. Now, we may want to challenge that and say, "No, surely it's because of failed leadership, pastors who abandon the Bible in their teaching." And, indeed, that is true. But it is the congregation that has often appointed these men as pastors, and it is the congregation that has tolerated from these men something less than what the Bible demands that they be about doing. Interestingly, even in this text, after Paul charges Timothy to preach God's Word (which we'll focus on more shortly), he notes that the challenge of doing this will come from the people—from congregations—who want to accumulate for themselves teachers who will speak something they want to hear instead of the truth of Scripture.

Therefore, though this word is directed to Timothy and is, thus, directly applicable to pastors and those who would be pastors, it is a word which we must hear as a church as well. And the reason why is because if this church turns away from the things which Paul says that we must be about in this text, it'll be because we as a church chose that for ourselves and tolerated something less than what this text commands. So, do you see how crucial it is that we all pay careful attention to the apostle's final charge as to what Timothy and all pastors must be about? Well, let me note them in three points. First, we must preach the Bible.

### **Preach the Bible**

As Paul gives this final charge to Timothy, he builds it up and sets the context in a way that you simply don't see elsewhere in his writings. It's more than him saying, "Now, I'm serious about this." He writes to Timothy, "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word" (vv. 1-2a).

Again, this language is extreme for Paul, as I can think of no other charge he gives in the Bible with as much of a solemn and weighty preamble. But it's actually something we can relate to because we often speak this way in wedding ceremonies, don't we? Most of the time the officiant will say, "We are gathered here in the sight of God to join together [so and so] in marriage." Now, why do we say that? We say that because we want to draw attention to the seriousness of a matter. Making vows, exchanging rings, and being wed as husband and wife is no small matter. We're proclaiming, "God is witness to what you do in this ceremony and will hold you accountable to the promises you're making today."

That's what Paul is saying. He's noting the first two persons of the Godhead are present, witnessing that Timothy is receiving this charge, and will hold him accountable to obey it. In fact, what I've noted he's implicitly saying—namely that the present Lord will hold Timothy accountable to obey this charge—Paul notes explicitly in the next phrase, as he describes Jesus as the one "who is to judge the living and the dead." In other words, the Lord Jesus Christ is no mere witness to this charge. He's the judge of all. Timothy will answer to him in terms of how faithfully he obeys this charge that Paul is giving him.

And it continues. Some might swear on heaven and earth, but Paul doesn't go that route. He appeals to the one who owns and reigns over heaven and earth and will make this evident at his coming. It is with the power of the risen and reigning Christ that Paul charges Timothy here. Again, it's hard to imagine Paul producing any greater current or power behind his words. Timothy must hear this charge as the most important thing he is to be doing. And what is it that Paul says? He writes, "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: *preach the word* (vv. 1-2a). Timothy must preach the Word. There is no more central or important task that he will do as one who leads Christ's church.

But Paul doesn't just make this charge of great magnitude and then move on. He notes the manner, ways, and times in which this must be done. First, he notes that Timothy must preach the Word, being "ready in season and out of season." That is to say, Timothy needs to preach the Word when everyone is saying, "Yes, amen, we want to hear the Bible." And he must preach the Word when people are saying they don't want to hear the Bible. He must be ready at times when it is easy and times when it is difficult. But why would Paul need to make this point? Well, he tells us why in verses 3-4. There, Paul writes, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."

Paul tells Timothy that he must preach the Word when doing so is popular and when it's unpopular because he knows that the day will come when it will certainly be unpopular. Professing believers will desire to hear something else than the Word because it says to them things that they don't want to hear or obey. So, they'll find teachers who will say what is pleasing to their ears, turn away from listening to the truth, and pursue things that simply aren't true. In other words, it's precisely because it will be unpopular that Timothy must keep preaching God's Word. Anything less will only comfort people in their hardened rebellion.

Moreover, Paul tells Timothy that preaching the Word requires Timothy to reprove, rebuke, and exhort. In other words, preaching must be more than simply communicating data. It requires exhortation. A faithful preacher can't simply communicate what the text says (though that is absolutely necessary) as if providing a running commentary through the Scripture; he also has to charge the congregation to obey it. If it addresses sin, which we are prone to commit, he'll reprove and rebuke the congregation, pleading with them to repent. If it is a text in which the recipients are challenged to obey, he'll exhort his hearers to obey as well. This is all part of preaching the Scripture.

Finally, Paul adds "with complete patience and teaching." The text must be taught. For most of my upbringing I heard preaching that wasn't focused on teaching the text, but this is crucial. It's the most basic thing that we focus on with the pastoral apprentices. The text must be taught. But it's also important to recognize that it's taught with patience. Things take a while to land. The line that has been passed down from preacher to preacher is, "When you get tired of saying it, it may be only at that moment that it is finally being heard." Teaching requires patience. And

the congregation isn't your enemy to be bulldozed over. Rather, they're your family. And so you must faithfully teach and exercise gentle patience so that all have time to take it in and understand it.

And so, Paul makes the grandest of charges to Timothy. He must preach the Word, in all these ways and with all the weight of responsibility that Paul lays out here. There is nothing else more important for the pastors of a church to do than to make sure that the Word is faithfully preached. That's not to say it's the only thing a pastor must do. It isn't. But there's nothing more important that he must do. He must preach God's Word—publicly and personally. How can you read what Paul writes in verses 1-2 of our text and think anything else?

I had a course in seminary in the early 2000s with Mark Dever, who is pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. He said that before he interviewed with the church there, he was on his way to being a professor and really wasn't looking to pastor. Therefore, in the interview, he just gave them answers without any care for how they might be received. After all, if they were offended, who cares? He'd just go on and pursue a teaching career, which he was going to do anyway. Therefore, when they asked him about preaching, he responded (and I'm paraphrasing), "Preaching the Word will be so much of a priority for me if I'm your pastor that I don't care if everything else in the church fails."

Now, that may be a bit of an overstatement, since the Lord commands other things in addition to preaching. But I'll say this, if everything else a church does is glorious but the Word isn't faithfully preached, the church is doomed. It will either die or eventually be unrecognizable from anything that the NT identifies as a church.

I plead with us this morning, let's not forget this as a church. We must prize and prioritize the faithful preaching of God's Word—whether it's popular or not. When the culture, even Christian culture, downplays preaching, you re-read verses 1-2 and ask what God says about that. It is the most important thing we must do. Second, Paul tells Timothy that he must remain alert, diligent, and focused, continuing to proclaim the gospel.

### **Remain alert, diligent, and focused, continuing to proclaim the gospel**

In verse 5 Paul writes, "As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist." Starting with the first of these exhortations, Paul reminds Timothy that he must be sober-minded. That is, he must remain alert and focused. He can't afford to be distracted. He can't afford to begin to turn his attention to other things. He can't dull his mind and just drift along. He must not get lazy and careless in his thoughts and attention. He must always recognize the importance of what he's doing and stay focused on the task.

Now perhaps this feels easy to us. But I think it's probably fair to say that most every church (if not every church) that has lost its way has done so because they failed to remain alert and focused. They were distracted by the demands of the culture and began to cater to them until they were pulled away from God's Word. Or it may be that they decided to pursue another good

work that fell short of the mission Christ had given his church, and that little loss of focus took them further and further away until they were no longer obedient to our Lord. We can't afford that. We must remain alert and focused.

And we also must be diligent, even to the point of enduring suffering. Paul has said this repeatedly throughout the letter, and it makes sense that he would do so in light of his declaration that all who desire to live godly lives will face persecution in the verses prior to these. You see, the enemy will destroy a local church through distraction and pull of the culture, and that is one of the more dangerous and subtle strategies he uses. But he also opposes the church through the force of persecution. Sometimes that'll be ridicule, mockery, and false things being said of us. Sometimes it'll be losing our jobs because we're not willing to step in line with a culture of sin. Sometimes it'll mean physical attack, imprisonment, or death. But no matter what comes, our response is simply to endure and keep pressing on. We will not allow the church to be deterred from the charge that Christ has given us.

And, finally, part of that task will involve our faithful proclamation of the gospel. Paul says to Timothy, "Do the work of an evangelist" (v. 5). Now, it may well be a particular role that Timothy was to play that Paul had in mind as an evangelist. And Paul elsewhere does recognize the role of the evangelist alongside that of the pastor or teacher. But my guess here is that Paul simply means one who faithfully proclaims the gospel—to those inside and outside of the church.

We must faithfully do this as well. The culture attacks us, and we respond by preaching the gospel to them. They attempt to distract us, saying, "Come do this other thing that, though it is not making disciples of Christ, is also good," and we respond by preaching the gospel. I'm not saying that's all we do as a church, but it is always a necessary element in what we do as a church. We must faithfully proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ, the God-man, lived, died, and was raised so that if we repent of our sins and place our faith in him we can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life as children of God.

Timothy must do all of these things to faithfully fulfill the ministry to which the Lord has directed him. He must remain alert, diligent, and focused, continuing to proclaim the gospel of Christ. And so must we do these things if we're going to fulfill the ministry that the Lord has given to us. Finally, persevere, with your eyes on that final day.

### **Persevere, with your eyes on that final day**

As we get to verse 6, Paul finally explicitly states what we've known all along. He's writing this letter on the verge of dying. He's about to be executed. He no doubt is ignorant of the exact day, but he knows it's coming. He knows he's at the end. And so he says, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 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 me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing" (vv. 6-8).

The way Paul pictures his life is as an offering to the Lord. And this shouldn't be surprising to us since he says in Romans 12:1-2 that we offer our lives as a living sacrifice to the Lord, which is our act of worship. In the OT, worship involved slaughtering an animal. In the NT it involves offering our lives to the Lord. And now that Paul is about to the end, he pictures it as if his life has been poured out to the Lord as a drink offering and the last bit is about to be poured out. He's made it. He's persevered faithfully. He hasn't abandoned what he's believed and taught, and he's continued to repent when sinning. He's fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith, as he pictures it.

Therefore, he knows that he's about to be received by his Lord and receive the crown of righteousness, even as a victor in a race would receive a crown of victory, like a trophy. But for Paul, it will be no mere trophy. The Lord, who has already declared him righteous and credited his righteousness to Paul, will make him righteous as well. Paul will enter into the life where he'll not only know he's been credited with righteousness, but he'll realize it, never again struggling with sin and the wicked desires we face in this life.

But Paul also mentioned that this isn't unique to him. This is the result for all who persevere and long for our Lord. This isn't to say that we're justified by our obedient works. We're justified by faith alone. But the faith alone which justifies will show itself in our willingness to repent and keep looking to our Lord in faith as our only hope throughout this life.

Therefore, the implication to Timothy is, "You too keep offering your life unto the Lord. You too keep fighting the good fight, keep striving to run the race, keep fighting to hold onto your faith, with your eyes on eternity. Don't get distracted by lesser, more temporary things. When you're suffering, remind yourself that the suffering you face in this age isn't worth comparing to the glory that awaits you. When you want to quit, remember that the prize of righteousness and life await you. So keep running. Keep fighting. On that great and final day, you'll not regret one bit the sacrifice it took." That's what this text says to us as well.

Again, perhaps I'm a bit prone to being melodramatic, but I don't know what tomorrow holds. I do know these days feel like they're passing quickly. Tom and Nathan, two of our faithful pastors, whom I can't imagine being without, are both in their sixties. Twenty years from now I'll be eligible to start drawing social security (if it's there!). That honestly doesn't feel like that far away, and it's why as elders we're always talking about doing today everything we can to set up the next generation to walk faithfully. But if the next generation does walk in faithfulness it'll be because we as a church demand that the Word of God is preached faithfully. It'll be because we remain alert, diligent, and focused in doing exactly what Christ has commanded us to be about, always proclaiming the gospel as we do. And it'll be because we persevered in these things, always keeping our eyes on eternity. May God grant us the grace to do this. Amen.