

December 8, 2024

THE BEGINNING OF THE END: THE OPENING OF PAUL'S LAST LETTER

2 Timothy 1:1-5

(1 of 8 in a series through 2 Timothy)

Martin Luther died on February 18, 1546. From the time he'd nailed the ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenberg until his death (nearly thirty years later), his life had been filled with all kinds of battles and hardship. He was denounced by Rome, his theology condemned in multiple universities, and he was finally excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church in January of 1521. The emperor even issued a decree concerning Luther, stating, "[Do] not . . . take . . . Martin Luther into your houses, [do] not . . . receive him at court . . . [do] not . . . hide him . . . afford him no help, following, support or encouragement. . . . Where you can get him, seize him and overpower him, you should capture him and send him to us under tightest security,"¹ before adding, "I have decided to mobilize everything against Luther: my kingdoms and dominions, my friends, my body, my blood and my soul."²

Not many people in history faced that kind of opposition in life and stood firm. Yet, even on his death bed, Luther was still challenged to stand firm in his faith that had brought such opposition. As Luther lay dying, ready to breath his last, he was asked once more, "Reverend father, will you die steadfast in Christ and the doctrines you have preached?" Luther's response? The last word he spoke in this life was a simple, "Yes."³

Luther was by no means the first or last to face opposition for proclaiming the gospel of justification by faith alone and die in confident faith. Nearly fifteen hundred years before Luther's death, the apostle Paul sat in a Roman prison, facing his inevitable execution and martyrdom as a follower of Christ. The historian, Eusebius, tells us that indeed the Roman emperor, Nero, had Paul beheaded sometime before the end of his reign in AD 68. And what were Paul's last words? We have them right here in this letter, 2 Timothy.

This second letter that Paul wrote to Timothy is the latest written letter of his that we have in the New Testament. This letter contains the apostle's last written words. As he writes to Timothy for this final time, Paul anticipates his coming death. We see this as he writes in 4:6-7, "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." So, as he opens this letter that serves as his last written words, what is his tone? What is the apostle's demeanor as he faces a certain execution in a matter of months if not days? In a word, it is confident.

¹ Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, Trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 203.

² *Ibid.*, 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

As Paul opens this letter to Timothy, knowing that he's facing death, he exudes confidence. He is confident in what he believes, in what he's preached, in the life he's lived. He's confident in the face of death. And I can't help but think that one of the reasons is so that Timothy—who no doubt couldn't imagine losing the one who is a spiritual father to him—might be strengthened by the confident assurance that Paul demonstrates in the face of death. Therefore, this morning, I want to show you the different areas in which Paul expresses his confidence so that you and I might be strengthened in our confidence as well as we seek, like Paul, to fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith until our death or Christ's return. First, let's start by noting Paul's confidence in the life to come.

Paul's confidence in the life to come

As Paul opens this letter, he opens it in his customary way, identifying himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (v. 1). It's quite similar to how he opened his first letter to Timothy where he identified himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope" (1 Tim 1:1). Moreover, in both letters to Timothy, he follows the identification of himself by identifying Timothy—the recipient of the letter—as his "true child in the faith" or "beloved child," respectively. But, interestingly, Paul adds an unusual phrase to his introduction in this letter. After noting that he's an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, he adds, "According to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus" (v. 1).

I don't think that's a phrase Paul thoughtlessly threw in as he sits in a Roman prison contemplating his death. I'll explain why. After Adam's sin in the garden, death reigned. That's the very language Paul uses in Romans 5. In this fallen world death is more than just the expiration of the body. It is an evil tyrant. Indeed, it is referred to as the last "enemy" to be destroyed in 1 Corinthians 15:26. So, death stands as an enemy that for all without Christ is the manifestation that they are condemned.

But that's not the case for the believer, solely because of the work of Christ for us. Jesus came to remove condemnation from his people, destroy death, and give us life. Death was not the last word for him as he rose from the dead on that Easter Sunday morning, and Paul knew it wouldn't be the last word for him either. Nero may chop off Paul's head, but Paul would be with Christ in that instant and at the resurrection even his body would be raised. This is the "promise of . . . life that is in Christ Jesus" that Paul is referring to.

And so as Paul faced death, he knew that life awaited him on the other side. He was confident of it. He knew his Lord Jesus Christ had promised it, as he has to all of those who trust in him. So Paul could face death defiantly. It would not have the last word.

Brothers and sisters, I want to make clear to us today that the life that awaits us on the other side of death isn't some fantasy, or empty hope, or dream that we've created to be an opiate against the pain of death. It is as sure and certain as Christ's own resurrection to life.

In other words, if Christ is raised, then his promise of life to us is sure and certain. And the Bible makes unmistakably clear that Jesus conquered death and lives. He appeared to over 500 at one time and showed his followers so surely that he'd risen that they were willing to suffer and die in testimony to that truth. And, if our faith is in him, we too will live forever with him. That is his promise to us. It was a promise that was no doubt all the more precious to Paul as he stared down death from a Roman prison cell, and it is a promise that should bring us comfort as well. Just as Luther's followers wanted to know that even at the doorstep of death he was still holding fast to the doctrines he'd proclaimed, Paul opens this letter assuring Timothy that he is confident in Christ's promise of life. But it's not the only expression of confidence we see here. We also see Paul's confidence in the heritage he received.

Paul's confidence in the heritage he's received

One of the interesting things that we see with the Reformers is how frequently they are at pains to show that their teaching of justification by faith alone isn't something new with them. They constantly write to show that the church fathers were saying the same things. Luther didn't want to be seen as some kind of pioneer, noting that he was preaching nothing different than Jan Hus had preached a century before.

As Paul opens this letter, he seeks to affirm the same thing. The apostles didn't see themselves as coming along and bringing a whole new message to the table that was divorced from those faithful saints in the Old Testament. They were proclaiming Jesus as the fulfillment of what the Old Testament taught and what the faithful saints of the Old Testament looked to in faith. Paul wants to affirm that once more at the end of his life. Notice how he writes in verse 3, "I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors."

Now, this may catch us off guard at first in light of the fact that so many Jews did not believe in the Messiah. However, there have always been a remnant who did. Paul labels this line of believers as children of promise in the book of Galatians. So, it may be that Paul is merely thinking of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and those Jews who came through the line of Benjamin, as he had. But one of the arguments that Paul makes in Galatians is that there are two lines that come through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—children of the flesh and children of promise. And by "children of promise" Paul simply means all those who have trusted in the promises of the Lord and in his Son. Therefore, it may be that Paul isn't merely referring to his ancestors as those from the line of Benjamin but Moses, Joshua, David, Isaiah, and the like. His true ancestors are all those faithful Old Testament saints who believed. He is merely picking up the baton from them as he proclaims Christ.

Paul will also remind Timothy that he is the beneficiary of saints who have come before him, specifically mentioning his grandmother and mother. He writes in verse 5, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice." Again, Paul and Timothy can look back and say that other faithful believers came before them. They are the beneficiaries of a great heritage.

This too should strengthen us in the face of death. We're not the first who held to these glorious truths of our Lord and found strength when staring down death. As the author of Hebrews mentions, our ancestors in the faith were "stoned, sawn in two, . . . killed by the sword . . . destitute, afflicted, mistreated" (Heb 11:37), but they persevered in faith until the end. Not only are the things we profess, sing about, and proclaim each Sunday true, but these truths have sustained generations of faithful believers before us who fought the good fight and finished the race. We can think of Moses, David, Paul, Eunice, and Timothy as well as Jimmy Pettigrew, Barbara Perry, Bill Nettles, and on and on. These died in faith, and they held fast because what we preach is true. We are not alone in this walk. We have one another, but we also have a great heritage of faithful saints who have come before us. Paul is clearly reflecting on that reality—for himself and for Timothy—as he pens this letter from a Roman prison. So, Paul is confident of the promise of life, and he's confident in the heritage he's received. But we also see Paul's confidence in the truth he proclaimed.

Paul's confidence in the truth he proclaimed

As Paul mentions serving God in verse 3, he specifically notes that he does so "with a clear conscience." Now again, it makes sense that Paul would think about this kind of thing as he knows that his death is near. He's starting this letter with a good bit of reflection. He's started the letter proclaiming that he is still holding to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus. He's not abandoning his profession. He's proclaimed that he's in line with all the faithful saints who have come before him. But he also wants us to know that he has carried out his ministry with a clear conscience, and that's a huge deal for us. Why? Well, let's think about it.

Paul's testimony is unique. For all of us, we heard the gospel—the good news that Jesus lived, died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day—from someone else. Perhaps it was our parents, grandparents, a pastor, neighbor, or whomever. That's not Paul's testimony. He didn't hear that Jesus rose from the dead from a third party. His testimony is that he heard it from the risen Jesus himself.

This is what is true of all of the apostles. They all were eyewitnesses to Jesus after his resurrection. He appeared to them multiple times. Once they were all together in a room, though Thomas was missing, and he appeared to them another time. Then, after that, he appeared while Thomas was with them. Then, he appeared to commission them and to tell them to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit. The apostles testified that Jesus had risen from the dead because Jesus appeared to them repeatedly after his resurrection and physically touched him. That's why they were willing to die for what they were preaching. They knew it was true. They were eyewitnesses.

Paul, however, wasn't with the other apostles during that time. He wasn't a follower of Christ at all during that time. He was persecuting Christians. And yet he opens this letter identifying himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus" (v. 1). How can this be true if apostles had to be eyewitnesses of the risen Christ?

Well, remember his testimony from Acts 9? He was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians when the risen Lord Jesus appeared to him from the sky, saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). But it’s not just that the Lord appeared to him in the sky that day. Paul argues in Galatians 1:11-2:10 that he didn’t receive the gospel from any man. He received it directly from Jesus. Jesus taught him the gospel. In fact, Paul says, he only consulted with Peter three years after the Lord taught him the gospel. Then, after fourteen years he went and consulted with more of the apostles and shared with them the gospel that he’d been taught directly from Jesus, and they confirmed that this gospel was precisely what Jesus had taught them firsthand as well. Paul specifically says that when the others shared the gospel Jesus had taught them, they “added nothing to” what he was saying (Gal 2:6). They agreed that Jesus had obviously appeared to him and taught him the true message of redemption.

So, that’s a pretty big claim. When Paul starts this letter saying that he’s an apostle of Jesus Christ, that’s what he’s saying. He’s saying that the resurrected Jesus appeared to him personally, taught him the gospel, and commissioned him to go proclaim that message to the world.

And Paul had done so. Now, that’s a bold claim. Was Paul actually the greatest deceiver whoever lived? That doesn’t exactly work for a few reasons. First, we’ve already noted that the gospel he told the other apostles Jesus had taught him was the gospel Jesus had taught them. That’s impossible to explain since he hadn’t been consulting with them. Then, he suffered tremendously as he obeyed Jesus in taking this gospel to the nations. Typically when men come up with a falsehood and deceive others with it, they profit. Think about Joseph Smith with Mormonism. He took other men’s wives claiming that the Lord had told him to do this. David Koresh too had a similar teaching. No one else could impregnate the women but him in their little cult. Not so for Paul. He suffered in the most terrible of ways, worked to provide a living for himself instead of taking money from others, and ultimately died for the faith. In fact, as he wrote this letter from a Roman prison, awaiting his execution under Nero, he no doubt could have instantly been freed if only he’d sent a message to Nero saying, “I disavow all I’ve said, distance myself from other believers, and testify that Nero alone is king.” But he wouldn’t do it. Why? It’s because he knew what he had proclaimed was true. As he says here, he serves God “with a clear conscience” (v. 3).

As Paul writes this last letter, facing death, he knows that everything he’s testified to is true. He’s served the Lord by proclaiming the gospel all over the world, and he has served the Lord with a clear conscience. For us, this is a reminder that the gospel you and I have received and believed in was delivered from Jesus himself, to eyewitnesses of the resurrection, who passed on this good news to us—with great cost to themselves—and they did it with clear consciences. They knew they were proclaiming the truth, and it was worth dying for. And, finally, we see Paul’s confidence in his successor, Timothy.

Paul’s confidence in Timothy’s sincere faith

It’s clear that Paul loves Timothy as his own son. He refers to him in verse 2 as “my beloved child,” reminding us that Jesus taught that the church is full of a hundredfold fathers, mothers,

brothers, sisters, children, etc. We are a family. And as he prays, in the morning and evening each day, Timothy is always on his mind, again, like a parent faithfully prays for his or her children. And so wants to see Timothy. He writes, “As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy” (v. 4).

It seems that Paul and Timothy had a visit, perhaps sometime after Paul’s previous imprisonment and before this one, they’d been able to visit. And as Paul left, Timothy shed tears. Again, it’s hard to overstate the love these two brothers have for one another. It’s a love that I know we can resonate with. After all, think about how many people in this church you’d do anything for when there’s no familial tie between you two other than your shared union in Christ. When Christ calls us to himself, he calls us to one another. And that’s precisely what we see here between Paul and Timothy.

But it’s not just that Paul loves Timothy, he is confident that Timothy will carry on in faithfulness to Jesus. He sees Timothy as carrying out obedience to the same Great Commission that Paul had given his life to. He sees Timothy as a genuine, faithful believer. Note how he affirms this in verse 5. He writes, “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” (v. 5). Paul is confident in Timothy’s sincere faith in Christ. He is, as he says, “sure” that the sincere faith that was seen in Timothy’s grandmother and mother dwells in him as well.

What comfort this must have been for Paul. Paul had been left alone by many as he was left in prison. He will mention in chapter 4 of this letter that Demas had deserted him, and others (though not wickedly) had gone on as well. He will even write, “At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me” (4:16). And yet, there’s Timothy. Again, he’s not the only one, but Paul is sure of his sincere faith. Timothy reflects that Paul had passed on faithful teaching to one who’d faithfully do the same.

One of the marks of maturity, I believe, for a Christian is that we get excited about the faithful labors of those who are coming after us. For all of us, eventually, life ends. That reality could make us grow bitter because our time is passing away or even envious because others are coming along to labor with perhaps fewer hardships than we knew. But for the mature Christian, we delight in looking at those who are coming after us and will carry the torch of faithfulness. It gives us comfort, even in the face of death.

And the reason mature believers rejoice in that is because they are looking not for their own legacies but for the honor and glory of Jesus. He’s the only one who gets the headlines, and if we are forgotten in the next generation but that generation is lifting up the name of Jesus, we rejoice.

I’ve never been in Paul’s position, sitting with the recognition that my death is right around the corner. Some of you have faced that and are even facing it now. Due to unforeseen circumstances, any of us could face that at any moment. But if we do, we can rejoice with the same confidence that Paul notes in the opening of the last letter he’d ever write. We can be

confident that the life promised by Jesus is real. Death will not be the last word. We can be confident because we aren't the first to travel this road and even face our deaths. We have a cloud of faithful witnesses who have preceded us in faith and were faithful to the end, strengthened by the Lord until that day. We can be confident that everything the apostles proclaimed is true, that their testimony preserved in the pages of Scripture is reliable, even as Paul knew his conscience was clear. And we can be confident that the Lord has raised up others to carry the torch and will continue to do so. The gates of hell will not prevail against his church. So let us see that we, like Paul, fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith—all by his grace. Amen.