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Sermon

Don't be Afraid or Ashamed! Be ready to suffer! Guard the Deposit!

2 Timothy 1:1-14

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I intend to focus on Paul's Second Letter to Timothy over these next weeks. It is one of the Pastoral Epistles, along with Second Timothy and Titus. These are letters Paul wrote to encourage leaders.

Paul led Timothy to Christ on his first missionary journey. On the next trip, Timothy joined Paul and travelled with him. By the time of the first Epistle to Timothy, he was in charge of the Ephesian church. It is probable that Timothy is still there when this letter was written and that it was the last of Paul's letters before his execution. It is dated to 67AD.

Paul is giving his final advice and encouragement to this church leader. He knew he faced death and so his words to his protégé have a special significance.

After a fairly standard greeting, we learn some aspects of their relationship. Paul prays night and day for Timothy. He longs to see him and remembers the tears of parting. Paul had a big heart – he often affirms his constant prayer for individuals and churches. And surely, there is no exaggeration here, since he states it with a clear conscience before God. It is good that we pray for other Christians. I am repeatedly touched and encouraged to know that every church in Kondoia Diocese prays for this parish each Sunday and Bishop Given prays for us with his staff on Fridays. It is good to lift our brothers and sisters before God for his blessing and help.

In passing, we may note that Paul refers to the sincere faith of Timothy's mother and grandmother. It is a great blessing to be raised in a Christian household. Sometimes, people lament that they don't have an exciting conversion story because they grew up knowing Christ. Don't despise the blessing of that good start – it is much harder to repair damage than to avoid it. Rejoice for your children and the children of our congregation who get a start knowing about Christ and protected from so much confusion and brokenness that abounds today.

Verse 6

Paul urges Timothy to fan into flame the gift of God which is in him. The metaphor of flame inevitably makes us think of the Holy Spirit. All Christians have the gift of the Holy Spirit; but not all are aflame with the Spirit. We need to keep fanning the flame of the Spirit within us. I need to, you need to. I am told that last week, Don spoke in tongues in the intercessions and Torben interpreted. That was fanning the flame of the Spirit – well done Don and Torben. I trust the message itself, the obvious activity of the Spirit stirred something in those who heard it. And surely there was an implicit challenge to do likewise.

Church, can we make it an intention to stir up the practical and spiritual gifts that God has given us, to fan into flame the work of the Spirit within us rather than let the embers burn down to ash and a memory?

Verse 7 – Do not be afraid!

Now Paul says to Timothy and to us that the gift of God – the Holy Spirit within us is not a spirit of fear. That is as strong word. God says over and over again in his Word, “Fear not!” Yes there is a positive holy fear of God, but the fear meant here is negative: timidity or cowardice. Rather God says, “Be bold, be strong for the Lord your God is with you.”

The presence of God in us by his Spirit gives us power, love and self-discipline so that we exhibit self-control and sensible behaviour.¹

It is good not to be afraid. The Christian needs to have the power of the Holy Spirit to follow Christ and serve him effectively. That is obvious or should be. But that boldness and power needs to be exercised in love and self-control lest we cause damage to others.

Verse 8 – Don’t be ashamed

Paul says, “Don’t be afraid” and “Don’t be ashamed of Jesus”. Often we are ashamed to admit we are Christians or to stand up for what we truly believe against the supposed scorn of this secular world. What is the risk to us of speaking about Jesus? The risk when Paul wrote this was rather more. Three years before letter was written the Emperor Nero started the first Roman persecution of the Church which continued through to 68 after Paul’s execution. While persecution was not yet widespread through the Empire, these were frightening and risky times. In that context Paul says, “Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord.”

Be Ready to Suffer

“But join me in suffering for the gospel.” Do not be afraid; Do not be ashamed, Be ready to suffer!

Before you dismiss this as idealistic, or worse masochistic, hear Paul’s reasoning. He says (verse 8):

But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life--not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

It is natural to think, ‘I would not have the courage I need,’ but if we suffer for the gospel it is by the power of God not in our own strength. Corrie Ten Boom, the famous Dutch resistance member who helped 800 Jews escape the Nazis told a story of her concern that she wouldn’t have the courage she needed:

“Daddy,” I said one day, “I am afraid that I will never be strong enough to be a martyr for Jesus Christ.”

Father sat down on the edge of the narrow bed. "Corrie," he began gently, "when you and I go to Amsterdam - when do I give you your ticket?"

I sniffed a few times, considering this.

"Why, just before we get on the train."

"Exactly. And our wise Father in heaven knows when we're going to need things, too. Don't run out ahead of Him, Corrie. When the time comes that some of us will have to die, you will look into your heart and find the strength you need - just in time."²

In the same way that any suffering is by the power of God, Paul reminds us it is this God who has saved us and called us to a holy life – again not by what we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.

¹ Friberg Greek Lexicon

² Quoted from “The Hiding Place” by Corrie Ten Boom

If we are afraid of the consequence of standing for Jesus, he reminds us that Christ has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light. Yes there is physical death, but the great assertion of the gospel, of Jesus, of Paul is that life continues beyond this life into something altogether more glorious and wonderful.

[On Tuesday, we will hold the funeral of Philip Wrigley from this congregation. Philip joined us last year and on the Alpha course came to a clear belief and trust in Christ as Saviour. On the Holy Spirit weekend he had a significant experience of God. Since then he has read the entire Bible and when I saw him a week ago in the hospice, he was firm in his confidence in Christ and the love of God and his hope of heaven. Philip died in faith and I know that he was welcomed into eternity last Tuesday morning. While we grieve at the parting, we can rejoice in his salvation.]

Paul was a prisoner at the time – which might have caused him shame. But no, he has been true to his calling to be a herald of the gospel, and apostle and teacher. That is why he suffered.

Do we have enough faith for this? You've heard Corrie's encouragement. Habakkuk told us that the just shall live by faith. It is our very sustenance and connection to life. And remember those words from the gospel when the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith.

Luke 17:6 Jesus replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."

It only takes tiny faith to make trusting contact with God – don't stress about the size of your faith; the question, 'Have I got enough faith?' always erodes it. Just get on and trust God and you will have enough.

Verse 13-14

So far: Do not be afraid; Do not be ashamed; Be Ready to Suffer. In verse 13-14 he adds, "Guard the Deposit."

Paul urged Timothy to guard the teaching Paul had handed onto him. Paul described it as a good deposit - a pattern of sound teaching. We are to keep to it with faith and love in Christ. It has to be guarded because it is under constant attack. It is under attack from the world, meaning the world system opposed to God motivated by rebellion against God and his ways. It is attacked by spiritual evil forces. It is resisted by the flesh – that part of us which resists God and wants our own way in our own strength. All these factors will attempt to distort the gospel. Already the Apostles had to defend the gospel against false teachers – whether the Hebrew Judaisers or the Greek Gnostics, or those who distorted the gospel to avoid the moral requirements.

There is nothing new, the same twists and deceptions keep coming around. Most involve diminishing who Christ is and what he has done. People want to believe they can save themselves without relying on a Saviour. Just as much today as in 67AD, we need to guard the good deposit that has been entrusted to us. The good news from this passage is that once again, the Holy Spirit is ready to help us. We are to guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

So there we have it: we are exhorted:

- Don't be afraid!
- Do not be ashamed of the gospel!
- Be ready to suffer!
- Defend the deposit of the gospel.

And in each case we are to rely on the Holy Spirit to empower us.