

**“Greetings from a Prison Cell”
(An Exposition of 2 Timothy 1:1-2)¹**

Introduction

Not too long ago we went through Paul's first epistle to Timothy. We as a church were going through the process of particularization in the PCA – becoming our own self-governing local church, and so we thought it would be a good idea to go through that book, as it has much to teach us about what it means to be a church and how we are to conduct ourselves as a church.

You may recall that in 1 Timothy 3:14–15 Paul tells us why he wrote that particular letter to Timothy:

“I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”

So there he gives us a snapshot of what the church is meant to be, how we should view it, and how we are to conduct ourselves within it – both officers and members alike. If more churches took Paul's inspired instructions here to heart, it is certain that the church in our day would be in a much healthier condition, and would be much more useful to our Lord Jesus Christ in building His kingdom.

Having finished that book (although by no means exhausting it), I thought it would be best for us to go through 2 Timothy as well. 1 & 2 Timothy along with the book of Titus are commonly referred to as the “pastoral epistles” because they deal primarily with instructions to young pastors as to how they were to carry out their ministry in the church.

There is a lot left for us to learn in 2 Timothy, especially about the nature of pastoral ministry. And that is good, not only for pastors and aspiring pastors and elders to know, but also for the members of any congregation as well. This epistle of Paul will help us all to have a right view of the gospel ministry, and being on the same page about that is of inestimable value for every believer.

That being said, it doesn't take long when one sits down to read through this brief letter of Paul to notice a stark difference in tone from his previous correspondence to Timothy. And that is because Paul's circumstances were very much different when he wrote this letter.

Not only did Paul *write this epistle from prison*, as he calls himself Christ's “**prisoner**” (1:8), and mentions that he was “**bound with chains as a criminal**” (2:9); but he also tells Timothy that *his time was short*. Toward the end of the letter, in 2 Timothy 4:6–8 Paul writes:

“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 to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

No doubt Timothy knew that he was to take heed to whatever Paul told him, but you can't help but think that this added even more seriousness and gravity to Paul's words in this final letter.

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

In his commentary on 2 Timothy, John Calvin writes:

“The chief purpose of this letter is to confirm Timothy both in the faith of the gospel and in his pure and constant preaching of it. But the circumstances of the time add especial weight to these exhortations. Paul had before his eyes the death he was ready to suffer as a testimony to the Gospel. Thus all that we read here about the kingdom of Christ, the hope of life eternal, the Christian warfare, confidence in confessing Christ, and the certainty of doctrine should be seen as written not merely in ink but in Paul's lifeblood; for he asserts nothing for which he is not ready to offer the pledge of his death. Thus the epistle may be regarded as a solemn and urgent ratification of Paul's doctrine.”²

If you knew that you were writing what was likely to be your last correspondence to someone (whether it was *your own* time that was short, or *theirs*), what would you write? Would you waste time and ink on unimportant matters? Or would you be sure to write of the most crucial and vitally important things?

Let that then influence how you view Paul's instructions in this epistle. Paul is getting ready to pass the baton off to Timothy, and he wants to be sure that Timothy knows what he is to do and how he is to do it as a minister of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In many ways the things that Paul wrote about in this letter are the things that he viewed as of first importance to his son in the faith. May we learn to think of them likewise.

The Apostolic Office of Paul

The first thing that we see in most of the New Testament epistles is the opening greeting. It is easy to gloss over these parts of the letters, but we should not be so hasty to do so, as there is much for us to learn here as well. And the first thing that Paul does here is to identify himself as the author of the letter and as *an apostle of Jesus Christ*. In v.1 Paul writes,

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus”

Paul claims three (3) things about his apostolic office here in v.1. *First and foremost*, he was **“an apostle of Christ Jesus.”** In other words, he was *sent by Christ Himself*, and endowed with the authority of His office directly by the Lord Jesus. The word **“apostle”** is related to the Greek word that means “to send.”

There are no more apostles today. Rather we follow the teachings of the apostles which we have in the Scriptures. The authority of the apostles is basically that of Christ Himself. We are to take their words in the Scriptures essentially as *Christ's words* to us.

The *second* thing that Paul tells us here is that he did not take this office unto himself. He did *not* put himself forward for the office, but was called unto it **“by the will of God.”** In 1 Corinthians 15:9–10 Paul said that he was the *last* apostle called by Christ and called himself **“the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.”**

² Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries*, Volume 10, p.287

The third thing that Paul mentions here in v.1 about his apostolic office is that it was “**according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus . . .**” Here he reminds us of *the heart of the gospel message*, that it is “**the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus.**”

It was to *the ministry of the gospel* that Paul was called first and foremost as an apostle; and likewise it was to *the ministry of the gospel* that Timothy and every true pastor is called to today as well. It is all too easy to lose sight of that important fact in the busyness of church life and ministry. But we must do all that we can to remember that and keep the main thing the main thing.

But there is probably more to Paul putting it the way that he does here in v.1. John Stott writes:

“[T]he gospel is good news for dying sinners that God has promised them life in Jesus Christ. It seems particularly appropriate that, as death stares the apostle in the face, he should here define it as a 'promise of life.' For this is what it is.”³

The “**promise of life**” for all who are in Christ by faith was not just a matter for the benefit of Paul's hearers, but also for Paul himself. And it is the good news of “**the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus**” that *consoles and cheers* Paul himself as he awaits his execution under Caesar Nero.

Paul knew and taught the same gospel truth that was penned so many centuries later in Q/A #1 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* that his only comfort in life and in death was that he was not his own, but belonged, body and soul, in life and in death, to His faithful Savior Jesus Christ!

Does the promise of life, spiritual life, eternal life, and even the resurrection life, the “life of the world to come” that we confess in the Nicene Creed, comfort *you* in all of your distress, even in the face of death?

Are *you* in Christ by faith, so that the “**promise of life**” in Him is yours? God Himself promises eternal life to *every* sinner who believes on Christ for salvation from sin.

The Love of Paul for His Son in the Faith

The second thing that we see here in the opening verses of this letter is Paul's love for his son in the faith. In v.2 he writes:

“To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This was a *public letter*, and not just for Timothy's own personal edification and instruction, which explains what might seem to be *a strange mix of formality and affection* in this letter. If it were just intended for Timothy's eyes only, there would be no reason for Paul to go into any detail at all about his office as an apostle of Christ (v.1). **John Calvin** notes that in his opening words referring to himself as an apostle “show clearly that Paul had in view not Timothy alone, but others through him.”⁴

Likewise, Paul not only *encourages Timothy* by calling him his “**beloved child,**” but also ensures that others who heard the letter read would hold Timothy in high regard for the sake of his ministry.

³ *The Message of 2 Timothy* (The Bible Speaks Today Commentary Series), p.24-25

⁴ *Ibid*, p.289

That being said, notice the sincere affection that Paul has for his **“true child in the faith.”** (1 Timothy 1:2) He has some difficult things to say to him, and a great weight of responsibility to place upon his shoulders, but none of that prevents him from expressing his fatherly love toward his young apprentice in the ministry.

Has God in his grace used you in some way to bring about the conversion of someone? Maybe someone not in your flesh and blood family? Do you not think of them now as your family in the faith, and in a manner even more special in some ways than others who believe? If so, thank God for it, and do not be ashamed to let them know that they hold a special place in your heart for it.

Or likewise if someone else was used by God in some special way (whether a pastor or not) to lead you to faith in Christ, do they hold a special place in your heart as a father or mother in the faith? If so, thank God for them, as God has not only chosen you for eternal life through faith in His Son, but has also elected the means through which He brought that to pass in time!

Grace, Mercy, and Peace

Lastly, Paul then tells Timothy, **“Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”** (v.2) He often opens his epistles this way, but we should not let that lead us to disregard these words as a mere formality.

Paul no doubt *prayed for Timothy* and for the church in which he served, even as he reminds Timothy in v.3-5. But here he also gives something of an opening benediction or blessing, much like a prayer, in which he not only points Timothy to the only sustaining power for his ministry, but also asks that these gifts and graces would be poured out upon Timothy **“from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

No true gospel ministry can be sustained apart from the *grace* of God in Christ. No ministry can hope for a single convert to Christ except by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. We are dependent upon God's grace *from beginning to end* in making disciples.

No true gospel ministry can be sustained apart from the *mercy* of God in Christ. It is the mercy of God in Christ by which we are saved in the first place, and we are no less the objects of God's mercies throughout our pilgrimage on this earth until He calls us home.

And no true gospel ministry can be sustained apart from the *peace* of God in Christ. Paul's own circumstances bear this out, as he could write a letter like this, expressing great care and concern for Timothy and the church, all the while awaiting his own execution in Rome!

John Stott summarizes this threefold benediction this way:

“We may perhaps summarize these three blessings of God's love as being grace to the worthless, mercy to the helpless and peace to the restless, while 'God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord' together constitute the one spring from which this threefold stream flows forth.”⁵

May God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord be pleased to multiply these blessings in us as we seek to serve Him in our generation, making the gospel of Christ known to our neighbors. - Amen