

## COME BEFORE WINTER



**Nearing the end of a lifetime of service and suffering for Christ, Paul, writing from prison in Rome, writes his last and most moving letter of instruction and gratitude to his younger friend and missionary companion, Timothy. Winter is approaching as Paul requests his books, papers and cloak.**

*Scripture:*

**2 Timothy 4**

1. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge:
2. Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction.
3. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.
4. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.
5. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.
6. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.
7. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.
8. Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.
9. Do your best to come to me quickly,
10. for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia.
11. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.
12. I sent Tychicus to Ephesus.
13. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.
14. Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done.
15. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.
16. At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.
17. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth.
18. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.
19. Greet Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus.
20. Erastus stayed in Corinth, and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus.
21. Do your best to get here before winter. Eubulus greets you, and so do Pudens, Linus, Claudia and all the brothers.
22. The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you. – *Paul, writing from Rome*



### THE PASTORAL LETTERS

The letters that we call First and Second Timothy and the letter to Titus were the last letters that Paul wrote. They are called the “Pastoral Letters.” And Paul wrote them from a prison in Rome.

Who were Timothy and Titus? They were Gentiles, meaning that they were not Jews. Timothy was the son of a Greek father, and a Jewish mother, living in a Roman province. That is about as multicultural as we can imagine. Timothy, who was younger than Paul,

accompanied Paul on journeys to Ephesus, Greece and islands in Mediterranean. I suspect that the relationship may well have been one of a mentor schooling his successor.

Titus was also the son of Greek parents. Paul brought Titus to Jerusalem to meet the apostles.

Timothy and Titus remind us that one of the great arguments of the early church was whether Jesus was the Messiah for Jews only, or if Jesus' message was universal – for Jews, for Greeks, and for Romans, like Timothy and Titus. Paul prevailed. Jesus was the Messiah for everybody, not just first century Jews!

## PAUL

Paul traveled extensively throughout Israel, Turkey, Greece and Italy. Paul was preaching in Rome when the fire broke out that most people believed was set by Nero. The Emperor Nero wanted to burn Rome to the ground and replace it with a city of his own design and own name. Nero needed a scapegoat to blame for the fire. He blamed Paul and the Christian converts.

Paul spent about a fifth of his life in prison. Paul was imprisoned for two years in Caesarea, Israel. Later he was captured and imprisoned in Rome following a shipwreck. Paul was well known as a Christian evangelist, so he was one of the first to be jailed in a sweep of the city by the Roman legions after the Roman fire. He was jailed in a dungeon very near the Roman Forum. He was sent to trial, imprisoned for several years, and he was finally executed for treason. He wrote The Second Letter to Timothy from the Roman prison knowing that he was about to be executed. Tradition says that Paul was beheaded by a Roman executioner. Who has been to this prison?

## CONTENT OF THE LETTERS

The three Pastoral Letters from Paul told Timothy and Titus how to deal with the organization and problems of the early churches he established. In one of the letters, Paul defined the qualities to look for in appointing good leaders and this included the spiritual and personal conduct of Elders and Deacons.

**In the face of many false and misleading teachings that began to circulate, Paul urged the infant churches to concentrate on essentials of the faith, and not be sidetracked. The best way to counter wrong ideas is to teach the truth, with tolerance and love.**

## TIMOTHY

Remember that Timothy was the child of a Greek father and Jewish mother – a mixed marriage. His home was at Lystra in central Turkey. Modern excavation in Lystra make it a very interesting destination. Paul came to Lystra on his first missionary journey and it must have been then that Timothy converted. The local church leaders formally commissioned Timothy, and he became Paul's loyal and trusted companion.

Timothy frequently acted as Paul's envoy to the churches. He was sent to Corinth when Paul heard of the troubles in the church there - no easy assignment. And at the time Paul wrote to him from the Roman dungeon, Timothy was in Ephesus, supervising the local Christian groups and responsible for choosing and training church leaders. Paul and Timothy had been through a lot together.

## PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO TIMOTHY

Paul's second letter to Timothy is probably Paul's final letter. Death awaits, Paul longs to see Timothy again and remember the journeys they have taken together. In the candlelight of a humid cell, within ear-shot of the Roman Forum, and yet nearer to the sewers of Rome, Paul reflects on his life.

## HE WRITES...

Dear Timothy, "I thank God, for what God has done through me."

The secret of life is simply to *know and experience* Christ (12; and see Philippians 3:10). We have good news for the world – we have a gospel that brings life. We need neither to apologize for it, nor try to improve on it.

## TIMOTHY

It has cost us something to be Christians. Timothy, in order to carry on for our Lord Jesus Christ, you will need single-minded determination not to be overwhelmed by the demands of life (4) and arguments that divide people. (16, 23). Not everyone who makes a good beginning, makes a strong finish in the race of life. But the way we live must demonstrate the truth of what we say. Do not bicker with irascible and short-tempered people, and do not fight over slogans and clichés, but hold to the truth with gentleness and love.

Troubled times are ahead. Those who are true to Christ will go through persecution - as Jesus himself predicted (John 15:20). Timothy, the scriptures contain all that is necessary for salvation and for right living.

I remember my first trial: (16). Like Jesus, I stood alone. All my friends deserted me and my enemies were outspoken. Timothy, you have been a friend through all this.

And now some personal requests.

Send my greetings to Titus, Tychicus, Trophimus – all of them serving in the field.

Timothy, I want my books and papers, and my thick cloak. Luke is here with me, and the faithful Christians in Rome (21) warm my heart, but the cold will chill my body.

And PLEASE COME BEFORE WINTER -- your friend Paul.

### WHY COME BEFORE WINTER?

- Come before the winter storms make navigation on the Mediterranean Sea impossible.
- Come before winter, because my life in this dungeon is unbearable. He says it twice (vs. 9, 21) I want to see you before my days are ended.
- Bring my favorite robe. Bring my scrolls and parchments. Bring the writings we have worked on, and our books that contain our ideas. They are my life work.
- And bring yourself so that we may talk about our travels together. That we may remember the difficult towns we went to, the time we were driven out of town in a hail of stones and the time when the first converts melted the ice that greeted us.

**COME BEFORE WINTER.  
MY TIME IS RUNNING OUT.**

### REMEMBERING FRANK HARRINGTON

This last letter of Paul was a favorite of the Rev. Frank Harrington. There is an urgency to it. Frank had developed sermon upon sermon using this text, and late in summer every year Frank preached another in the growing series using this text that highlights the essential teachings of Paul's life, and then punctuates them with this final paragraph of urgency. We don't have forever; sometimes we have to move with haste. Time is not endless. We may have to take a chance, we may have to push our luck. We may have to be brave.

Frank Harrington was pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. It is the largest church in our denomination with over 10,000 members. Most of them joined during Frank's tenure. There are dozens of pastors and professionals on the staff, and they are an important force in downtown Atlanta. I took Frank to lunch one day in New Mexico. We sat together in the sanctuary of our church, and talked of theology and our denomination. Frank let it be known that he and Jimmy Carter were friends and confidants. Frank gathered people together because he loved them.

The urgency of Christ's kingdom appealed to Frank. Frank died eight winters ago. I think it was a problem related to his heart. Not his spiritual heart, for this was a vigorous, spirited man, who spoke from the heart, and

acted boldly to keep our denomination from fragmenting further than it has. But his physical heart had a defect of some kind. Frank is remembered as one of the great church builders of our denomination. And when he thought about the problems he faced in our denomination or his own health, he was always a man of action and vigor. He loved this passage, "come before winter."

### ROME

Cheryl and I went to Northern Italy in 1999. I hope we can go back again sometime soon. We loved northern Italy, and I loved Rome.

By the end of our tour, Cheryl and I were tired. Before we were to leave Rome, we had the option of resting in the hotel room and going down to dinner early, or taking a walking tour in the soggy heat through the Roman Forum. We thought about our options. It was an easy choice: We decided to walk through of the Roman Forum and our excitement canceled out the fatigue.

It was just a hundred yards from our hotel near the Victor Emmanuel Monument. We scanned the valley that had been the heart of Rome. We could see the Arch of Titus overlooking the Via Della Curia. In the distance the house of the Vestal Virgins (another sermon), the Temple of Romulus and, in the distance, one of the seven hills. I stood at the Rostra from which the orator's tribune gave speeches to the citizens who debated and organized for action; the place from which Nero's orders were announced to citizens and non-citizens. Here Nero announced that the Christians were responsible for a devastating fire that had burned many of the wooden structures of Rome in the First Century. Here Nero announced that the cause of these fires was a zealot sect called Christians, and said, "I have arrested their chief spokesmen, Paul and Luke."

### THE CHURCH OF SAN GIUSEPPI DEI FALEGNAMI

At the west end of the Forum, there was a gentle hill with small church along the path. It was a modest white building, Stairs led up to the double doored entry. The church was built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and so it had a very Italian Renaissance look to it. The church is called the church of San Giuseppe dei Falegnami. I looked through the wrought iron bars that I could see just below the steps that led into the main sanctuary.

This small church is built above a dungeon called the Mamertine Prison. Prisoners were held in this dungeon prior to being sent to judgment and sentencing. There is an execution chamber in the deepest part of the dungeon. One of the lower cells has access to a spring that kept prisoners alive; in another part there is access to the sewers of the city where the remains of the dead were thrown.

Was this prison at the western end of the Roman Forum the prison in which Paul was kept, not once but twice? Was this the dungeon where he was executed?

And is this the place where Paul wrote the letters? Is this the place where important parts of the New Testament were composed? Was this the cold prison cell from which Paul wrote the letters that contained instructions to the church about election of Bishops, guidance concerning humane treatment of each other, and the urgency of preaching the word of God?

And is the place where Paul, with the first frigid hints of winter in the air, wrote to his companion Timothy, requesting his manuscripts and his warm coat, and where he closed his letter imploring Timothy, come and see me one more time? Do your best to come to me quickly. "Timothy, do your best to come before winter."

Yes. I think it was.

Did the letter reach Timothy in time? Did Timothy visit his traveling companion, one more time? How did this letter get circulated in the early Christian community and become one of the great summaries of Christian doctrine?

We don't know. We know it was Paul's last winter, and we know that time marches on for all of us. And we know that we too must make decisions based upon our priorities.

But this letter is not in the Bible because it was written to Timothy. No, it is in the Bible because it was written to you.

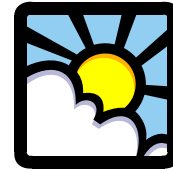
What shall we make of this day and what shall we put off until tomorrow?

Macbeth, in Shakespeare says,

"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief  
candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing."

--From *Macbeth* (V, v, 19)

But Paul says life is more significant than that. Every day is important. Don't bog down in yesterday. Be about life and legacy, leave the world better than you found it, be part of something that will outlast yourself, find a young person to mentor and help along his way, teach the children, care for the sick, enjoy what you have, and enjoy what you can give.



### *Salutation to the Dawn*

**Look to this day!**

**For it is life, the very life of life,**

**In its brief course**

**Lie all the verities and realities of your  
existence:**

**The bliss of growth**

**The glory of action**

**The splendor of beauty,**

**For yesterday is but a dream**

**And tomorrow only a vision,**

**But today well lived makes every yesterday a  
dream of happiness**

**And every tomorrow a vision of hope.**

**Look well, therefore, to this day!**

**Such is the salutation of the dawn.**

*by Kalidasa, Indian Dramatist*

Bring my books, Timothy, bring my manuscripts  
and my robe and bring yourself.

I look forward to your visit Timothy. We have much to  
talk about. And come before winter.



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