

²Timothy 1:3 I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. ⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. ⁶For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

⁸So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, ⁹who 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, ¹⁰but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. ¹¹And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. ¹²That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.

¹³What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Last Letter

Some of the most distressing, and at the same time beautiful, stories I have heard are stories of a final communication. It happens when someone knows that death is at their doorstep, yet they have the blessing—or is it a curse—of communicating one last time with their loved ones.

You probably heard about one of these a couple years ago. A man on Mount Everest was caught in a blizzard. He knew he would die soon. He took out his satellite phone and as he was freezing to death called his family to let them know he was thinking of them.

Let me ask you. If you were speaking or writing or texting your last words, to whom would you write them—spouse, children, parents, friend?

And *what* would you write? I'll give you a few seconds to think about that. What would you say in your last phone call? When you place that end of life call, you don't talk about the weather or the dog or your last trip to the doctor. You talk about things that matter.

In the New Testament, we have 13 divinely inspired letters written by the Apostle Paul. This letter, Second Timothy, is very likely The Last Letter. Paul is sitting in a Roman prison. This is his second lengthy imprisonment. His first long prison stay was pretty good as prison stays go. That time he was under house arrest, attended by many friends, and eventually released. But this second prison stay was different. This time it was not a house arrest, but chained up in an actual prison—which were pretty nasty back then. This time it was not in the company of friends. The one friend who did come to his aid had to search for him for days, before finding him. And unlike his first lengthy imprisonment, Paul was pretty sure this imprisonment would end badly. By “badly” I mean execution.

So when Paul, in a metaphorical sense, stood on Mt Everest in a blizzard and knew life was at its end, to whom does he place that final satellite call?

Paul had never married, so he couldn't write his wife. He had no children to leave his parting words of wisdom and encouragement. But there was Timothy.

Timothy, it seems, had been a teenage convert on Paul's first missionary outing. When Paul visited Timothy's church a second time, Timothy packed his bags and followed Paul for the rest of his evangelistic journeys. Paul learned to trust Timothy. When Paul stood at point A and heard of church difficulties at point B and wished there were two of him, he often sent Timothy as his representative. He could trust Timothy. Paul often called Timothy, "My son," the son he never had. So Paul's good-bye call, his last letter, is the book of Second Timothy.

There is that sarcastic statement—at least I hope it is sarcastic—"He who dies with the most toys, wins." But somehow, when we face our own end, we realize the silliness of the things we spent our life chasing. Few of us would spend our last breath asking, "How's my hair" or talking about the last power tool we bought. Faced with our own end we realize that, "He who dies with the most toys, dies." Most people have this feeling that there is something bigger out there. We Christians *know* that there is something bigger.

So Paul writes to Timothy, ***"I thank God, whom I serve... as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers... I have been reminded of your sincere faith"*** (3-5). Paul's last letter is not the heart-rending story of a man on a mountain in a blizzard who will never see his loved ones again, who died doing what he loved, but who realizes that his poor judgment has left his family bereft and dealing with his loss for the rest of their lives. Paul's last letter is not the last word. His eyes are beyond the prison cell and the execution chamber and the graveyard. He looks beyond.

He is thankful for Timothy's faith. This shared faith in Jesus is his hope. There will be a reunion, not in this world, but beyond it. And so he constantly thanks God for the faith Timothy has, and he constantly prays that Timothy will continue in that faith.

So what would you choose to write in your last letter? Oh, you might not choose to say what Paul did, and that is not a sin. But if you are really concerned about those closest to you – and I am sure that every single one of you is – we do well to consider Paul's choice of last words.

Paul felt it important to remind Timothy about where he came from. ***"I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also."*** Humanly speaking, Timothy had faith because his mother and grandmother made it a priority to bring up Timothy in the fear of the Lord.

Oh, how important it is for you parents, and grandparents, to heed this! Is your family one which makes God a priority? Or is God just kind of squeezed in when other things aren't scheduled. Which trumps which? Do school activities trump God time? Does vacation time trump God time? Does making a living trump living for God? Children pick this up. They sense very quickly what is most important in your life. And they copy that. And if God is down the list in priorities in your life—even though you kind of wish you put God higher—you can be sure God will be low in your children's lives too. Which is why Paul was so thankful for Timothy's mother and grandmother.

This is my guess—just my guess—that more people come to a knowledge of their Savior and get to heaven because of parents than any other people, pastors included. No one has a greater potential to bring their children to a right relationship with their Savior than fathers and mothers. And when Christian parents fail to do this, it is a grievous sin. This is so important for younger people who are contemplating a family, or maybe even if you are a long way from having a family. Think about that *before* you have children. When Jesus said in our Gospel reading, ***"Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones***

to sin” – when Jesus said that, he had parents in mind. He meant me as a parent, he meant you as a parent. This should cause every parent to do some soul searching, and repenting!

But let us focus on what Paul focuses on – he focuses on the positive result of godly parents and grandparents. Eunice and Lois were tools in God’s hand to make Timothy a believer!

Now I must say this because the world spends so much time saying the exact opposite thing. God’s command is that children only be born to a married father and mother, and that those parents remain married for their entire lives. That is God’s clear and consistent plan in the Bible.

But we also know that in this world each and every one of us sins often and are in turn victims of others sins. Which means that some find ourselves in family situations which are not what God intended. It is not ok—but it is forgiven in Jesus Christ. And through that repentance and faith and forgiveness, God blesses these lives. God is so powerful and loving, that he overcomes our wickedness with his blessing.

In Timothy, God extends a ray of hope for the Solo on Sunday mother (or father) – by that I mean the mother or father who has to single-handedly do all of the spiritual nurturing of children. In these verses is hope, not condemnation for the single mom who is devoted to bringing up her child in the fear of the Lord. Maybe Timothy’s mother was a widow, or a single mom, or married to an unbelieving husband—we don’t know. But it was not a team effort by Timothy’s parents.

How many Christians have come from that less-than-ideal situation. We can think of the Apostle Paul who had a believing mother, but whose father was not. We can think of some of the great Christians of the ages, John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace* whose father who cared nothing for him spiritually. There was a fourth century man named Augustine from a similar situation, who, if you know something of the history of Christianity is probably the most influential Christian outside of the Bible. These and many more are testimonies to encourage parents who, for whatever reason, have become single-handedly responsible for the spiritual well-being of your children. But even when God’s ideal is not our reality, we know that God’s Holy Spirit works through his word to build faith in the hearts of our children.

Paul says to Timothy, “Thank God for those who brought you to God while you were young. Now... Now, remember what you learned. In fact, let me remind you... ***God 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... Our Savior, Christ Jesus, has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel***” (9-10).

Surely Timothy knew this already. But it is so important that Paul needed to confirm these truths in his last letter.

Faith is not an empty box that we fill with whatever we want to put in it. Saving faith is a first aid kit with some very specific contents. If a first aid kit has no bandages, tape, or antibiotic, it is worthless. In the same way, God repeatedly tells us that saving faith has some very specific contents. And the chief of these is trust in a Savior Jesus, who fulfilled the law for us, and who fulfilled the punishments of law for our sins.

Faith is not a generic, “Believe whatever your heart tells you” faith, but a “I believe in God the Father... I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son,... I believe in the Holy Spirit”—that sort of specific faith.

Finally, Paul looks to the future when he will be gone and tells Timothy, “***Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.***”

Timothy can not guard this faith on his own. Paul tells him to let the Holy Spirit loose. And the way

that the Holy Spirit is let lose in our lives is by contact with God's Word. If you aren't listening to God's Word you have benched the star player, and your efforts are going to lead to a humiliating shut-out. But when we take time for Bible reading, for reading Word-based devotions, for meditating on God-revealed truths, the Holy Spirit is in play, guarding and strengthening our faith to the end.

What would your last letter to your loved ones sound like? Would it be, "Work hard, love others, smile." Not bad, but it won't get you any farther than the gravestone in the cemetery. Or would your last letter say, "Remember the faith you were taught, hold to it. I will see you in heaven."

Or what if, as often happens, you never have a chance to set your house in order, to write that last letter, and the only letter you leave is written on the lives of your loved ones. What will be the testimony of your life engraved on theirs? Will it be of one who lived for this world and its riches, its prizes, its applause and recognition? Or will the last letter engraved on their lives be the legacy of one who put a relationship with Jesus, the Savior first?

May your last letter be one that will actually guide people into eternity. Amen.