

1. A Letter we Need

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[0 : 00] And let's pray together. We thank you, gracious God, that on a chilly day like this, we can gather together and have great freedom as we meet around your word to consider you and what you've done in sending your son into this world.

And we thank you, too, for the freedom that we have to speak of what you've done to others around us. And we pray, therefore, that in the busyness of life, whatever our circumstances today as we meet together, whatever cares and concerns we have, we pray that for this brief period, you would help us to have clear minds and unclouded thoughts and to understand more about the Lord Jesus Christ and why he came.

This we ask in his name. Amen. Well, I'd be very glad if you turn to 2 Timothy and chapter 1. And in the Bibles on your seats, you'll find that on page 995. I'm going to read the first half of this chapter.

2 Timothy, chapter 1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my beloved child, grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

[1 : 38] I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy.

I'm reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now I'm sure dwells in you as well. For this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

For God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control. Therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me, his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do.

But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I'm convinced that he's able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you've heard from me in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. Yesterday, I had my first twitch of pre-Christmas insanity.

[3 : 39] Only yesterday, which is a great blessing, but I was sitting having a quiet coffee yesterday morning, enjoying the beautiful blue sky and the sunshine when through the double glazing came faint but unmistakable those familiar words, here it is, Merry Christmas, everybody's having fun.

I had been having fun, but there's just something about that refrain that's trotted out every year that reminds one forcibly that it is that time of year again when despite one's best efforts it really becomes very difficult indeed to remember Jesus Christ and his coming into the world.

The famous radio comedy show I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue is subtitled An Antidote to Panel Games. Well, these next four Wednesday lunchtimes are titled Remember Jesus Christ and it's subtitled An Antidote to Christmas.

So if you're one who struggles with Christmas, this is for you. Our key verses for the next few Wednesdays are 2 Timothy chapter 2 verses 8 and 9.

Just look at them for a moment and I'll read them. Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a

criminal.

[5 : 06] But the word of God is not bound. Sounds promising as an antidote to Christmas, doesn't it? Jesus is their center stage. Remember Jesus Christ. But the background image is not the familiar Christmas card nativity scene with squeaky clean, stable and smiling animals and the ready-break glow everywhere.

Instead, the scene is a prison cell somewhere in the Middle East where the elderly missionary, chained and in difficulty, writes an urgent final letter to his younger colleague to remember Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul is not writing to someone struggling with the pre-Christmas rush. He's writing to a Christian worker in crisis and a church in crisis.

The Christian worker is Timothy, an experienced missionary by now, and the church is the church in Ephesus, a very significant church. Both the missionary and the church are in view in this letter.

The missionary is obvious, chapter 1, verse 2, to Timothy, my beloved child. The church less obvious, but turn to the last sentence of the book, would you please? The Lord be with your spirit, grace be with you.

[6 : 21] Now that you is a plural you, not a singular you. Paul expects that other people in Ephesus are going to be looking over Timothy's shoulder as he reads this last letter from the Apostles' prison cell.

It's to the missionary and the church, and that's because both of them are in serious danger of forgetting Jesus Christ. Now at this stage, you may well say, come off it, that is not possible.

A Christian church forget Jesus Christ? You must be joking. Walk through the door of any church building in the country, no matter how clueless, and you'll find the words Jesus Christ all over the building.

Ask anyone in the building, what's the reason for this building being here, and someone will say, well, it's because of Jesus. And even if a Christian church could possibly forget Jesus Christ, how could a Christian worker forget Jesus Christ?

And a Christian worker who's been trained by the Apostle Paul himself? Inconceivable, you might say. Well, far from it. In these four weeks, we'll learn that churches and church workers do forget Jesus Christ.

[7 : 35] And we'll learn how it happens, and we'll learn how it can be avoided. We're going to be wandering around this letter a bit, but our starting place is in chapter two. And let me say that whether you're new to the Christian message, just looking for yourself at what it might mean, or whether you've been at it for years, I think you will find these sentences and this letter remarkably helpful in keeping the real Jesus clearly in view at a time of view when that's oh so difficult.

Now, in the rest of our time together, I want to do three things. First, introduce us to the situation. What is going on in Ephesus that's so difficult? Second, introduce us to a key theme of chapters one and two, the theme of remembering.

And third, put those two together and come to some very surprising conclusions. Here's the first. What is going on in Ephesus that is so difficult to handle?

Ephesus was the location of a very important gospel work. You'll find it recorded in Acts chapter 19 and I'd like you please to keep a finger in 2 Timothy and just flip back to Acts chapter 19 for a moment, page 928, and turn to verse 10.

A little description of Paul's lunchtime services in Ephesus and verse 10 says, this continued for two years, a long work, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

[9 : 10] Big impact through this lunchtime work. Not just the city, but the whole region has been exposed to the message about Jesus. In chapter 20, before Paul leaves Ephesus for the last time, he gathers together the church leaders in Ephesus and he warns them to be careful.

Chapter 20, verse 28. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away disciples after them.

Therefore, be alert. And you step back from that warning and you think to yourself, it is hard to believe that such a thing could happen. A church where Paul himself had been for more than two years, leaders trained by his ministry training program.

Could they really do that? Hard to believe, isn't it? Well, a handful of years further on and that is precisely what has happened.

[10:38] Back to 2 Timothy. Twisted things are being taught in the church in Ephesus and the leaders Paul trained are at the heart of it. Hard to believe?

Well, that's what happened. What are they teaching? Well, we get little hints here and there in 2 Timothy of the sorts of things that are being taught. Look, for example, at 2 Timothy 2.16. Avoid irreverent babble for it will lead more people into more and more ungodliness and their talk will spread like gangrene.

Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus who swerved from the truth saying that the resurrection of the dead has already happened. They're upsetting the faith of some.

The resurrection of the dead has already happened. What do they mean by that? Well, difficult to pin it down exactly. Presumably, they thought that in significant ways the resurrection life already belonged to them in the present age.

[11:38] Maybe they thought they had it all now. Maybe they'd stopped looking forwards to the coming of the Lord Jesus. We don't know that exactly but what we do know precisely is that Paul's lifestyle had become very unacceptable and embarrassment in Ephesus.

Look at chapter 1 verse 8. Here's the embarrassment factor. Timothy, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord nor of me his prisoner.

That's the key thing. The message about Jesus has led Paul to be in prison for Jesus and that's very embarrassing. You can understand that if there are people around going on about what they have now, the apostle in prison over there is very difficult to be associated with.

That's the situation then. On the one hand, a version of the Christian message that's all about now. On the other hand, the apostle and his message for which he is in chains.

Which way to jump? Which way will the church go? Which way will Timothy go? For he is teetering on the brink in this letter. Now this, of course, is a perennial question, is it not?

[13:04] Not just in the first century but in every age. which way to jump? Who to listen to? Who to trust? Who to line up with? Who to side with? If we think this kind of decision is easy, we're very much mistaken.

Iraq's, in Iran's Supreme Court, news from August this year, has upheld the death penalty for Pastor Yusuf Nakadani, who was convicted of apostasy from Islam in September 2010.

He's appealed against his conviction, but a written verdict from the court has now confirmed that the appeal was unsuccessful. The death penalty will be annulled if the father of two renounces his faith. His wife was arrested in June 2010, sentenced to life in prison. She was released on appeal in October after four months in prison. Difficult to experience that if you're the person, but isn't it difficult to be associated with that?

If you're a believer, trying to convince somebody else of the truth, you're going to line up behind a guy who's got the death threat hanging over?

[14:17] It's difficult, isn't it? That's precisely the sort of thing that's going on in Ephesus. There's an attractive version of the Christian message around, and there's a genuine one, and the genuine one doesn't look very impressive, because its proponent is in chains.

Timothy is not a novice, but it is very difficult in every age to be associated with somebody who's getting it in the neck for the truth, especially when other people are saying how good it can be now to follow the Lord Jesus.

Ease or hardship, peace or conflict, which is it to be? Do you think there aren't churches all over Scotland today facing precisely those sorts of decisions?

Ease or hardship, peace or conflict, shame or honour, who to listen to, who to side with? Even for a seasoned Christian worker and a solid gospel church, such decisions could go either way, and that's why Paul writes this letter.

And so one of the big themes of chapters 1 and 2 is reminder. Paul urges Timothy to remember certain things. It was there in our key verse, verse 8, remember Jesus Christ, and it's all over the beginning of chapter 1.

[15:47] Let me just point you to three things that Paul urges Timothy to remember. One, remember our personal affection for one another. chapter 1, verse 3.

I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers. Night and day, as I remember your tears, I long to see you.

See what he's saying? I remember you in my prayers. I remember your tears when we parted. You do remember, don't you, how much we love one another.

He's rekindling loyalty by reminding Timothy of their personal affection for one another. Remember, I love you, and you love me. Keep at it, and don't give up.

Don't be ashamed, not of me. We love one another. That's the first reminder. Second reminder, a reminder to Timothy that his faith is the genuine article.

[16:57] Verse 5. I'm reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now, I'm sure, lives in you as well.

Almost certainly, Timothy needs to be reassured that he is a proper believer, for he's being made to think that maybe he's not.

I talked a couple of weeks ago to an excellent gospel worker in a very difficult situation who said, you know, for the first time since my conversion, I'm beginning to wonder if I'm a real Christian. Christian. I did not think it would be possible for a real Christian to have this kind of difficulty or think and feel the things that I'm thinking and feeling.

Whatever the church that you come from, do you think that your minister or your elders could be under such pressure in life and in ministry that they doubt they are real believers?

[18:04] Do you think that's possible? Well, if you don't, you are being naive. For that is precisely what Timothy is doing. Timothy is far from a novice and he needs to be reminded that his faith is the real deal.

That the faith he took on board for himself is the proper thing to keep believing. Remember how much we love each other. Remember that you're a genuine believer and remember that God gave you this ministry that you're in.

Chapter 1, verse 6. For this reason, I remind you, remember word again, to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. Do you notice the very close link between Timothy's God-given ministry and Paul's influence?

fan into flame the gift of God in you through the laying on of my hands. The ministry you were given, Timothy, old chap, is the same one that I'm involved in.

[19:12] God gave you the same sort of ministry as mine. Remember that. And therefore, verse 8, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord nor of me, his prisoner.

The Lord gave you this ministry. If you're ashamed of me, you're ashamed of him. Three reminders then.

We love each other. Don't be ashamed of me. Your faith is genuine. Don't give it up. And God gave you my sort of ministry. So don't despise it. It's the real thing.

Now, all of these reminders raise a big question, don't they? Can it really be true? That a gospel worker doing the real gospel work could possibly need this much reminding?

And the answer is, yes, it could. Look at the unlikely logic of verse 10 following. What has the Lord Jesus Christ done?

[20:14] He has abolished death and his gospel message brings life and immortality. How wonderful we think to ourselves reading that. How amazing. Paul goes on.

For this gospel, I was appointed a preacher, an apostle and teacher. Well, how exciting for you, we might well think. And he goes on, verse 12, and that is why I'm such a success and everyone loves me.

Well, if only it were like that. Which is why I suffer as I do. Oh dear, we think something must have gone wrong, but nothing has gone wrong.

This is the big surprise of this passage and this morning's sermon. That the wonderful message of the risen Jesus Christ, a message that brings life, resurrection, immortality, and eternal glory to everyone who believes it, is that it always brings personal suffering for the gospel worker and for the gospel church always.

You'll find the same combination of ideas in our key verses. Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, there's the resurrection message, the offspring of David as preached in my gospel for which I am suffering, bound like a criminal in chains.

[21:40] Oh, there's glory to come, verse 10. I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that's in Christ with eternal glory. There's eternal glory to come, but for now life involves all kinds of endurance for the apostle.

That is why this letter had to be written. To remind Timothy and the church in Ephesus of the surprising and painful reality that the good news that brings life and immortality and glory is intimately linked in this present age to personal and corporate suffering always.

Two take home things for us this afternoon. One, the resurrection gospel does not look very resurrectionish just yet.

If you don't get that on board properly, you will always be worried whether you're a real Christian. Because you will find it hard being a Christian, and when you do, you'll think this can't be right, something must be wrong.

If you don't get that idea on board properly, you'll always wonder whether your own church leaders are proper church leaders. For you'll see them having a hard time. They don't look very resurrectionish just yet, do they, your church leaders?

[23 : 05] And when a Hymenaeus and Philetus-like ministry walks through the door one day, you'll think to yourself, ah, that's what I've been missing all this time.

And you'll follow them straight away and be led away from the truth. The resurrection gospel does not look very resurrectionish just yet. If it did, Timothy wouldn't mean reminding, would he?

It'd be obvious. And this letter would never have needed to be written. And if you're finding it hard belonging to the Lord Jesus at the moment, do you think that is because something is wrong with your faith?

You tend to think that, don't you? But the answer is probably not. It's just because the resurrection life doesn't look very resurrectionish just yet. And if your church is finding it hard to belong to the Lord Jesus and follow him at the moment, do you think that's because they've got it wrong?

Well, probably not. It just doesn't look very resurrectionish just yet. Second take-home thing. Churches and Christian workers easily forget Jesus Christ.

[24 : 17] Easily. Oh, it's not that they stop mentioning him or thinking about him or doing Christmas. They just stop thinking about the shape of his life.

and the shape of his ministry and the shape of his message, which is suffering now and great glory to come. That, of course, is what the real risen Lord Jesus Christ invites us to, every one of us, without exception, to receive his forgiveness, to belong to him forever, to serve him and to share his pattern of life.

Great difficulty now sometimes, but life and immortality and great glory to come. Let's pray together. Amen. Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound as a criminal, but the word of God is not bound.

We thank you, Heavenly Father, for this urgent letter. We thank you that it so accurately reflects the realities of the Christian life.

[25 : 51] We pray that reading it over these weeks and thinking about it, we would remember Jesus Christ and join with all those who, for the sake of the joy to come, endure great hardship in the present age.

Make us faithful to the message of Christ and eager to introduce others to that which will bring them eternal glory. This we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen.