

Fan the Flame

Series on 2 Timothy

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Bible Text: 2 Timothy 1

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If you're using the church Bible, page 995, 2 Timothy 1 and I'll read from verse 3, a letter from Paul to Timothy,

“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. 4 As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. 5 I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. 6 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, 7 for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”

There is a sense of urgency in the apostle's voice as he writes this letter. It is his last letter extant that we have available to us. He is, at this point, in the death cell. Though the sentence has not been pronounced, nonetheless it shortly will be and he will be taken from this cell to be beheaded and dispatched from this life into the life to come. He's surrounded, not only by the threat of death, but he's surrounded by circumstances that are less than conducive to personal peace and joy. He's been hearing reports. His life-work poured out as it has been in planting churches and he's been hearing reports that these churches are sliding into error of one kind or another or into evil practices of one kind or another, that there have been defections, major defections by people whose names are well-known among the churches as they have abandoned their faith or their commitment and have gone their own way and now Timothy, his son in the faith, a great colleague of his and his bright hope, as it were, for the future of the gospel, Timothy is wobbling in his faith. He is losing it to some degree and Paul has this very much on his mind as he writes this letter.

In light of that, it is a bigger surprise that he should begin his letter by saying that he thanks God for his ancestors, that he thanks God for Timothy because this is not the way we would respond, at least many of us, I think in the contemporary church. Whenever there are negative circumstances or we're facing negative circumstances, we tend to turn in on ourselves; we tend to look inside rather than outside; we look at our own experience and our own heart and we ask ourselves the question why is God not meeting my need?

Or why is the church not meeting my need? And we begin to wonder why it is that as we look in at ourselves and as we become absorbed with these self-obsessed questions about why it is that others or God isn't responding to this sense that I have that everything in my life is not the way I would want it to be and that nothing is making me happy at this moment, we find ourselves in a descending spiral of discouragement, depression, despair and so on.

The apostle Paul, who has got a lot to be discouraged about sitting in a prison, no way out except by the executioner's sword, hearing these reports of people he knows who are abandoning the faith so precious to his heart, of even Timothy, Timothy of all people, who is becoming wobbly in his faith, begin "I thank God." He thanks God because, you see, he is looking out of himself. He's looking out of himself at others who are encouragements to him and he's looking upwards to God, himself, and he's grateful for what he does see. He knows that, for example, Timothy loves him. He knows that from the tears that Timothy shed when they were parting that he mentions in verse 4. He knows that Timothy, in spite of his wobbles and in spite of his unbelief at one level, nonetheless, is a genuine Christian. He has a sincere faith. He may, this moment, not be behaving the way he would like him to be, but nonetheless at the root of Timothy's life is a genuine experience of God in Christ and he's grateful for that because Paul has learned to listen to Jesus. When Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these other things will take care of themselves." Paul has learned to listen to Jesus, that the first thing in your mind should be as you swing your legs over your bed in the morning and they touch the cold wooden floor or the warm carpet, "Seek first the kingdom of God." Whatever happens today, whether it's good or ill, whether I like it or not, whether it comforts me or discomferts me, the kingdom of God comes first. It transforms the way you look at life.

Here, for example, as we open this letter, you see how he does this as he thanks God and we looked at this somewhat last time but I think it bears revisiting and some applications being made to our hearts as he records the story of Timothy's life. He mentions Timothy and he mentions Timothy's mother and his grandmother. Now, we know something about Timothy that I didn't mention last week and that you can find out for yourself if you read Acts 16:1, that Timothy's father was a Greek, that he was a pagan man, that he most likely never became a Christian. The one thing we can say is that in Timothy's upbringing, his father was invisible. He might as well have been an orphan in terms of a father in his upbringing and in his spiritual progress. Reckon what this would do for us today, we would say every time he met a crisis in his life, "Well, the problem was that my dad wasn't there when I needed him." Timothy could have said that. "The reason that I'm wobbly in my faith, you know, the reason I'm becoming discouraged and distrusting and am ready to abandon it or at least I feel the pressure to abandon it, is all my dad's fault. If only my dad had been a believer," or if he had been a believer, "If only my dad was there for me."

Now, this is not to let you dad's off the hook. I'm not going to let you off the hook that easily but the point is that Paul, as he reflects on this, does not give Timothy any cause to start being all inward looking and frustrated. Paul is not a therapist, he is a pastor and

he's saying, "You know, think of this, Timothy, that whatever was absent in your life, here were these rocks in your life that was your mother who was a believer. There was your grandmother who was a believer and through their faith, you were brought up in a covenant home and you heard the gospel and you came to believe in the gospel and you are resting alone in Christ for your salvation." Now, let me say to you: you who are here this morning and you were brought up in a Christian home and you cannot remember a time in your life when you didn't love the Lord Jesus and maybe like me, as you were growing up, you thought to yourself, "If only I could tell someone the story, a great story about how I became a Christian."

I remember when I was growing up, I started reading these books by a man called Dave Wilkerson and he was telling the story of these gangsters in New York and I thought, "Wouldn't it be great to be into drugs, sex and rock-n-roll?" I was into rock-n-roll but none of the other things. "Wouldn't it be great to be into those things so that I could be a gangster in New York and be converted." There were a number of problems with that, of course. I was in Glasgow, not New York, so that was going to be an obstacle to that but I thought, "Wouldn't that be great if I could tour the country like some of these guys, telling this great story of how I'd done all these terrible things and God had saved me." Well, if you've ever felt like that, as a covenant child, let me tell you: there is no greater testimony than your testimony to be able to say, "There never was a time when I did not love the Lord Jesus." and he saved you from going down that route of all the sex, drugs and rock-n-roll and all the memories that I know still haunt some of those who've been converted out of that background and that destroy, in a sense, something of the innocence of joy that they might have in the Savior. Never despise that work of grace and if you're a covenant child and you've grown up and you've never come out for Jesus, you have never nailed your colors to the mast and you've never publicly, personally proclaimed yourself to be a decided Christian and said publicly "Jesus is Lord," no matter how young you are, how small you are, do it today. Do it today. Don't be afraid to say, "Jesus is Lord."

Well, that was just an incidental, now back to the passage. In the passage today, Paul has reminded Timothy about the legacy that he has received not only from his family but the legacy he's received from his ordination because this young man, he's not that young actually, he's in his 30s, so he's over the hill and on his way down the other side. This man had been ordained as a minister of the word and the sacraments. Sorry to discourage you friends, we will have therapy afterwards for those over 30 that need it in the back, Carroll will be there. He doesn't know that but he does now.

He is talking to Timothy and he's talking about his ordination to the ministry. He has already mentioned it in the first letter, what we know as 1 Timothy, when he talks about the presbytery laying on hands and here he is saying, he's reminding Timothy that he, Paul, had been one of those elders who had laid hands on him at the time of his ordination. And what he's doing, do you notice, is something that Paul does over and over again in his letters: he is reminding Timothy of something. "I remind you," he says, verse 6. Paul has remembered his faith; Paul has remembered his tears; Paul has remembered the influence of his grandmother and his mother. Now he's saying to

Timothy, “There is something for you to remember, Timothy.” Because as C. S. Lewis once said, “We human beings are so built that we have a tendency to forget. We have an active forgettery.”

Now, I can say this from personal experience, you see, because yesterday I came here and I spoke to our 20s and 30s group last night and we’re going through the book of Ruth and through that book I’m trying to minister to those who are getting over their 20s and hitting their 30s and are really in serious trouble. But they’re having fun and after I’d done that, on my way home, I go into the CVS and I get my little basket and I go around looking for these things that I’m looking for and I take quite a while finding what I want and I get it into the basket and then I go to the checkout and I discover that I haven’t got my pocketbook or wallet with me. I have no money and have no cards and I don’t know where it’s gone so I have to put everything back and have to go home. I still can’t find it. This morning I’m getting ready to come to church, not that I needed it here this morning because we haven’t yet installed the swipe cards on the racks so that you can actually use your card when you’re giving your offering but I’m looking for it this morning and my wife tells me that I forget everything. I say, “You don’t have any idea. I mean, look at all these people I see every week. These people, I’m thinking about them all the time or I’m thinking about the sermons that I’ve got to preach to them. I’m in heavenly places and my mind is in exalted places. You know, these trivial things that you want me to think about all the time is ridiculous.” It doesn’t get me anywhere, by the way, nowhere does it get me. It still gets me into trouble for it. Anyways. Don’t tell her. She’s there.

Paul is reminding Timothy of his ordination. “I remind you,” he says, “to fan into flame the gift of God.” I think the gift of God there is a kind of comprehensive gift. It is the gift of ministry; the gift of teaching and ruling the church. It is the gift of the gospel and at ordination, the church, which is the pillar and ground of truth, bestows on the one being ordained the authority and power to preach that gospel. “You’ve got the gospel, we’ve handed it to you, now you are unleashed on the people of God to proclaim that gospel in all its wholeness and all its fullness. The whole counsel of God. That is your charge and you’re set apart to do that.”

Paul is writing in this second letter, he is much more closely interested in the personal relationship with Timothy and so in his first letter he mentions the presbytery, that is all the elders who’d been there, but in this letter he just mentions himself and he reminds Timothy, “I was there. You remember? I was there. I was one of them. When I laid my hands on you, you remember? God equipped you. He gave you everything you needed. All the gifts and graces you needed for this work to which God had set you apart.” He’s reminding him. “Remember,” he says, “this great calling that you had. Remember this ministry God has given you. He’s given you a work to do and I want you to fan into flame.” Why is he telling him this? Because there isn’t a problem? Because somehow or other, you know, he’s just writing this so that we could read it and wonder, “Well, Timothy isn’t really all that bad and there’s not really any big danger here.” No, the reason he’s writing this is there was a danger. The danger was that the flame of his passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ, the flame of his passion to minister that gospel and teach this gospel to the people of God, the flame of that passion was somehow in danger

of going out and he has to say to Timothy, “Timothy, stir it up. Stir. Fan the flame. Get it going again! Don’t let it linger. Don’t just let it peter out, as it were.”

I just want to say that this is a great danger to men who come into the ministry. It is a regular danger. There are many things that lead to this danger: there is ministerial laziness, for example. The kind of thing that happens, a man leaves seminary and that’s the last he ever looks at his books ever again. He is finished with that stuff. All that learning and reading and studying and getting his heart and head into the word of God, he’s done with that. He can now get on with the practical work of the ministry and he wonders why the people aren’t fed. It’s because he stopped reading and thinking and praying and getting the gospel into his heart and he stops reading his own tradition and he stops reading his confession and he stops getting his head around those boundaries of faith that he needs to know and to teach to people. Ministerial laziness. Ministerial laziness that manifests itself on just getting by, that focuses on conference attendance and vacation planning and conflict avoidance rather than working hard to get the gospel out.

And it isn’t just ministers, of course, just in case you thought I was going to let us all off the hook here. Every believer, every one of us, has a calling. Your lot in life, your network of people, your sphere of influence, your life is at the service of the King of kings. Every one of you. Every one of us. And you and I, do you know this, you and I are more simply than what we owe our parents or our friends or the schools we’ve been to or the life experience we’ve had. We’re more than all of that. We are also what God, himself, has made of you, what God has put into you and where God has put you in your life. Whatever your circumstances. You may find yourself in a difficult marriage but maybe God’s put you there. Well, he has put you there. Maybe you find yourself in a difficult job. Maybe you wish things were different. Friends, that’s life. That’s the way it is. It’s just the way it is.

And Timothy finds himself in difficult circumstances and what the apostle Paul is saying, “Get back to the beginning again. Get back to what it’s all about. It’s about doing what God has given you to do where God has put you.” It’s a great challenge, isn’t it? Especially when things are going bad, when you feel under pressure, when circumstances take a turn for the worse, when you’re struggling to make ends meet or you feel as if others are against you or your soul seems dry and your heart seems hard. Take what God has provided to cultivate those gifts and graces that God has bestowed upon you. You say, “Well, how do I do that?” Well, you’re doing it to a measure this morning because God has put this in your calendar. One day in seven when you may meet with God’s people, where you may sit under God’s word, where you may be exposed to God’s truth and where you, therefore, tap into God’s Spirit and without this, you have no light and no heat and I don’t just mean the heat from the bodies you’re sitting next to. I mean the heat of the white hot power of the Spirit of God who promises to be with us wherever we meet in Jesus’ name. Now you see what Paul says.

Here is the thrust of our thing this morning. Look at verse 7, “fan into flame that gift for God has done something for you and me.” What has he done? He has given us a spirit, not of fear, but of power and love and of a sound mind or self-control. God has given to

us a spirit. Now, the scholars are divided either this is a lower case spirit worked in us by the Holy Spirit, that's one scholarly line of thought, or this is the Holy Spirit who works this lower case spirit within us. Can you see any difference in those? Either it's the spirit worked in us by the Holy Spirit or it's the Holy Spirit who works the spirit in us. Either way, it seems to me, all the scholarly discussion that I've read this week amounts to the same thing: the Holy Spirit is involved and your spirit is involved and the Holy Spirit is either working that spirit in you or this is the spirit that the Holy Spirit works in you. Either way, the spirit's involved and your spirit's involved and he says this, "The Holy Spirit does not work in us a spirit of fear." What he means here by "fear" is not ordinary fear. It's not the kind of fear that makes you panic or that renders you unable to move and sometimes you know that fear that sometimes leaves you unable to speak. This fear, however, is a strong fear. The Greek word here is a very strong word that means something close to cowardice. It is a phobic aversion to risk or threat or difficulty or even duty.

This spirit of fear is illustrated in the parable Jesus once told, the parable we know as the parable of the talents. In that parable, he illustrates clearly the duty of service, the reward of faithfulness and the danger of sloth. He talks about a man going on a journey who calls his servants and trusts them with his property and to one he gives five talents, to another two talents and to another one. He goes away and when he comes back, he discovers the man who had five has made five more. He now has ten. The man who had two has made two more and he now has four. The man who has one talent, however, has gone and dug a hole in the ground and hidden it for safekeeping and when the master returns, he rewards those who had multiplied their talents, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little and I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." And then the man with one talent comes forward and he's asked why he did this. He says, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man and reaping where you did not sow, gathering where you had scattered no seed so I was afraid and in cowardice I went and hid your talent in the ground here. You have what is yours," he says. In other words, he wouldn't take responsibility for having received this one talent. He buried out of fear that something would happen to it, that he would lose it or it would be misused or stolen or whatever. He was afraid, terrified and all he did was bury the talent. That's a terrifying thing because we read that the master says to him, "Take the talent from him. Give it to him who has ten talents for to everyone who has will more be given and he will have an abundance but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. Cast the worthless servant into outer darkness."

Timothy was tempted to bury the gifts God had given him. That's why Paul says, "God gave us a spirit, not of cowardice, not of fear." It may very well be that what Timothy was confronting was this that if he used his gift, if he taught the word of God, if he taught it in all its fullness, that he would provoke some people to anger. That he would suffer opposition from some other people; that he would discomfort those who were comfortable in their faith; that the movers and shakers in the congregation might be disturbed and make life uncomfortable for him because he was expounding all the counsel of God. Maybe any one of those things. Maybe there were some things in the

Scripture that if he proclaimed them, it would get him into trouble with the authorities, whether the Jewish or the Roman authorities.

He was in danger of muting perhaps the uncomfortable and disturbing word of God and you know that's the kind of culture we are in today. We are in a culture today where people will accommodate and tolerate everything and anything except biblical Christianity. And the danger is, of course, that we allow ourselves to accommodate to the culture. I mean, we're facing, for example, mockery directed at our Christian doctrine of creation, in our belief in one human origin, the historical Adam. Or there is the scorn heaped on our understanding of human nature and sexual morality and there is the incredulity expressed over our belief in the supernatural whether it be the virgin birth or miracles or the resurrection of Jesus. What are we tempted to do in this context? If you just think I'm not thinking now from the pulpit, I'm thinking now in ordinary conversation with our friends. We're tempted to take the coward's way out. We're tempted to keep quiet, to bury the talent of the gospel.

I remember an occasion where I'd gone to a new church and one of the first things that happened in this new church was that the leadership were having a day's retreat and they were having an historian from Sterling University in Scotland who was speaking to us and he was speaking about, it happened to be Baptist view of authority, that was the title and he said, "In Baptist view of authority, typically and historically," he said, "there is a quadrilateral: there is Scripture, tradition, reason and experience." And it sounded very plausible and he was arguing, of course, that this was the historic Baptist position but it was not so. If you knew anything about historic Baptist position especially in England, the 1689 Confession and in America the New Hampshire Confession of Faith, they are identical, you will know that that was not their view but that he was presenting this as if it was the received wisdom. And I was brand new and I didn't know, really, any of them. I was brand new to this church and I sat there fuming but I said nothing. I have regretted to this day saying nothing.

Why did I say nothing? He was a professor at Sterling University. He could wipe the floor with me. I wasn't that convinced that I knew all the chapters and verse. Though I felt I knew the material, I wasn't convinced that he wouldn't make a fool of me. I thought they might not take me seriously. I don't know what reasons I kept silent but I have regretted keeping silent. I made a decision after that that I would never keep silent again.

But you see what we face, we face this because we are sensitive. We're afraid of other people. We're afraid of failure. We're afraid of opposition, of persecution, of rejection, of mockery, of scorn. Paul says to this man, "God has not given us a spirit of cowardice." But that's ultimately what it is: it is cowardice. What has he given us? He has given us a spirit of power, love and self-control. A spirit of power: grace enabled energy. Paul often talks about this in Ephesians 3, "Strengthened with power through his spirit in the inner person." In Romans 15, we are able to complete the work of God, why? Because of the power of the spirit. Or the passage we read this morning in 2 Corinthians where the apostle is talking about his thorn in the flesh. He doesn't tell us what it was but what it was, he said, was to him, in his eyes, potentially limiting and injuring and effectively

neutering his ability to be effective for God in the ministry and so he prayed to God, three times he'd said to the Lord, "Lord, do you not see that having this problem is keeping me from being as effective as I could be for you? Do you not see that? Do you not see that I'd be a better evangelist if I didn't have this problem? Lord, if I didn't have these circumstances, Lord, I would be far more useful to you." Each time he prayed that prayer, God said, "No. No. No. My strength is made perfect in your weakness."

And God taught him that there is an equal force and power, the power of God, for every emergency and every circumstance and every crisis that we meet in our lives. We are not left on our own. We have the spirit of power given to us. As E. K. Simpson puts it: "A man or a woman in Christ counts for more than a man or woman by himself. He or she enjoys a grand alliance and unseen resources." A spirit of power. You are not on your own. "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world." You face that problem, you face that challenge, you face that question, you're not left on your own, the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. Christ indwells you. The angels of God encompass you. You have a spirit of power matched to a spirit of love. There is grace enabled compassion. The love the Spirit has poured into your heart, the love he's demonstrated in Christ that he brings back to you over and over and over again. You are what you are by the grace of God in Christ who demonstrates his love for you that "while you were still sinners, Christ died for you."

And he enables love. You say, "You don't know how unhappy I am at home." Don't you believe the Spirit of God in you can actually unlock love in your heart for that person who is so difficult? Do you really believe in God at all? The spirit of love and a spirit of self-control or a sound mind or we might use the word level-headedness. It's an important thing. It's getting focused again. It's like the skittish horse that has been agitated perhaps by passing vehicles and you curb it, you get it back into control again. That's the kind of thing that this word means. The opposite of blind panic or spiritual paranoia or irrational zeal or religious fanaticism. The opposite of that. Sound mind. Self-control. God gives you that. He gives you that. That's available to you. God has already given you that.

Paul says to Timothy, "Use these things. Believe them. Put them into practice." Don't throw up your hands in horror and say, "Oh, there is nothing that I can do. This is the way it is. It's terrible. Beam me up, Scotty. Get me out of here." That's what we want. I know, I've been there and Scotty never beams you up. I know Scotsmen are great, but they can't do that for you. Because, you know, there is no passivity in the Christian life. We rest in Christ for our salvation and then we're told to get on with the job here. Get on with it. Live for God in the world.

You see that these things belong together. Calvin says this, he speaks of this power as accompanied by love and self-discipline. In order to distinguish the power of the spirit from the intemperate zeal of fanatics who rush in with reckless haste and boast that they have the spirit of God but the power of the Spirit, the powerful energy of the Spirit, is tempered by love and sobriety. Thomas Odin writes, "Lacking love, power is dangerous."

Lacking power, love is ineffective. A love that is empowered but lacks a sound mind is apt to be wild and fruitless. These three gifts are complementary.”

So, let me say this, here’s what we have, these resources. Do you know the story of Elisha, the prophet of Israel? He had a little cottage somewhere out in the middle of no one’s land near the Syrian border. One day he wakes up in the morning and he’s waiting for his servant, Gehazi, to go out and draw the water and make his morning coffee and bring it to him. Gehazi goes out to draw the water and he comes rushing back into his master and he says, “Master, you’ve no idea what’s happened over night. The entire Syrian army is camped outside our front door and they’re circling the house! And there’s you and me and there’s all of them with their swords and their spears and their military might! And their numbers, there’s millions of them!” He was exaggerating. He speaks evangelistically as we say in clerical circles.

And he’s all agitated and he’s terrified. Of course, he’s terrified and Elisha says, “What’s the problem? Have you made my coffee yet? I’m useless in the morning without my coffee.” And Gehazi says to him, “Forget your coffee! What about those Syrians out there?” And Elisha says, “Oh well, Lord, please open my servant’s eyes. Go out and look again.” So Gehazi goes outside. He looks around, same army, same numbers, same weapons, same ferocious looks on the face of the Syrians. He lifts his eyes and looks at the hills around and the hills are crawling with soldiers and chariots of fire and he says involuntarily, “The armies of God and of Israel!” God had opened his eyes to see the infinite resources that surround the people of God.

Brothers and sisters, you go back into this godless, antichristian world we live in, you go back to where God puts you tomorrow morning. You go back there and when the pressure is on and when the circumstances are hostile and when people’s language is intolerant of you and when those things come up that are undermining of your faith and when you are shaken in your convictions by the world’s culture and the world’s hypotheses and the world’s assertions, remember this: the armies and the horsemen of Israel, the Lord of Hosts is with you. The angel of God encamps around the people of God. There is greater with you than that which is in the world. God has given to you, not a spirit of cowardice but a spirit of power and love and of a sound mind.

Let’s pray together.

Father, we thank you that in your great mercy you send us into this world not on our own but empowered by the Spirit to live for you, to live for Christ, to live with an intentional passion for your glory and your praise. We thank you for this and pray that you would bring it home to our hearts. We forget it so soon. Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above, tell me the old, old story when you have cause to fear that this world’s empty glory is costing me too dear. Lord, we pray that that story of your redemption and your power would enflame our minds and hearts today for the glory of Jesus. Amen.