

2 Timothy 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 April 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

- [0 : 00] 2 Timothy chapter 4 I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom, preach the word.
- Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.
- As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry. 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.
- Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica, Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.
- [1 : 14] Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful for me for ministry. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.
- Alexander the coppermith did me great harm. The Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. At my first defence, no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me.
- May it not be charged against them. But the Lord stood by me, and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.
- The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen. Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Anesophorus.
- Erastus remained at Corinth, and I left Trophimus, who was ill at Miletus. Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia, and all the brothers.
- [2 : 23] The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you. The final chapter of 2 Timothy, and likely the final chapter of Paul's corpus, begins with a solemn charge from the apostle.
- Timothy has on previous occasions been addressed or charged in the company of many witnesses. Here Paul charges him in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, in terms of the eschatological horizon of Christ's coming in judgment.
- He speaks of this event in three terms, judgment of the living and the dead, his appearing, and his kingdom. Each of these terms brings out a particular facet of the event that Paul is looking forward to, and in terms of which he wants Timothy to act.

These realities are imminent. The judgment of the world has already been set in motion by the death and resurrection of Christ, and with AD 70 on the horizon, the establishment of the kingdom and the judgment of this world is very near at hand.

This has the effect of intensifying the sense of the urgency of Paul's charge to Timothy. The charge has a moral urgency, but it also has an eschatological urgency. The time is short, and the judge is at the door.

[3 : 33] Timothy, in this situation, must preach the word. He needs to be a faithful servant of the message of the gospel, declaring it boldly. He must take every opportunity that is granted to him, always being prepared to seize such opportunities when they present themselves.

He must be ready in season and out of season. Many commentators have taken this expression as referring to the way that Timothy must take the opportunities whether or not they are convenient to him.

However, Philip Towner suggests that a background in the philosophical discourse of the time makes more sense of the statement here. Philosophers spoke, for instance, about the importance of taking the right moment to speak a particular truth, so as to be most likely to receive a favourable reception.

The problem is that when the time is short, you do not have such a luxury. Truth must be presented urgently and persistently, not merely when the time seems most propitious for it.

Paul, in essence, seems to be saying, don't wait for the perfect moment and as a result, find that all opportunity has passed you by. He must convict people with the truth. He must challenge false teachers and opponents in a more disciplinary sense.

[4 : 40] He needs to exhort, encourage and to teach, to provide people with instruction that moves them towards the truth and righteous behaviour. And in all of this, he has to act with patience and forbearance, with composure and mastery over his temper.

Much of what Paul is doing in this charge is reinforcing points that he has made previously in the letter. For instance, in chapter 2, verses 24 to 25, Besides the gravity of the eschatological frame within which Paul has presented Timothy's vocation, he also wants Timothy to recognise the urgency of the present time as people are about to be desensitised to and drift away from the truth.

A widespread rejection of the truth is on the horizon. This will occur as people become impatient with and intolerant of the truth and its teachers. It will become unpleasant, tiresome, boring, unpalatable and burdensome to them and they'll turn away from it.

Along with this will come an appetite for falsehood that will drive a quest for teachers who will satisfy it. Paul describes this with the colourful metaphor of itching ears. People who reject the truth in this way will accumulate false teachers.

Paul has described some of these movements already in 2 Timothy chapter 3, verses 6 to 7. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

[6 : 13] As this movement away from the truth occurs people will wander off into myths. Elsewhere in the pastoral epistles Paul has warned against the impact of myths, the way that empty speculations and groundless fables and esoteric doctrines all distract and detract from the clarity of the truth in the gospel.

Such false teachings are perhaps attractive precisely because they do not have a practical bite to them. They flatter people that they are particularly illuminated, that they have a peculiar insight into reality, but they do not speak with any moral force into people's lives.

Faced with the rising tide of such false teaching and false teachers, Timothy's faithfulness in his charge is all the more imperative. He needs to be sober-minded, a person who is alert and serious, who recognizes the gravity of the issues that he is dealing with and acts accordingly.

Once again, as he has done on several occasions in this epistle, Paul charges Timothy to endure suffering. In the days to come his mettle will be tested and he needs to come through proven and faithful.

Timothy must do the work of an evangelist. The exact nature of the evangelist's duties is not entirely clear. The role of the evangelist is mentioned alongside others in Ephesians chapter 4 verses 11 and 12, and he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

[7 : 36] Philip was an example of an evangelist in the book of Acts. It is possible that the role of the evangelist is particularly defined by itinerancy. Persons like Philip travelled from place to place, they were not just pastors in a single location, nor for that matter were the apostles like the Twelve or like Paul.

Perhaps the role of the evangelist was an early church role that mediated between the apostles and then figures like the overseers and the elders. The book of 2 Timothy is so important because the times are perilous.

Paul's apostolic ministry is reaching its end. He knows that he is about to die. False teachers are on the rise. Former workers for Christ are deserting their posts and others seem to be falling back dismayed.

Paul himself has experienced widespread personal rejection and persons he once depended upon have let him down. Faithful and trustworthy ministers are spread thin on the ground. If there were ever a time when faithful and committed ministers were absolutely essential, it was that time.

Paul speaks of his own situation. He is already in the process of being poured out as a drink offering. What exactly Paul means by speaking of himself as an oblation is not entirely clear.

[8 : 46] Perhaps the sacrifice is that of Christ and he is being poured out upon that sacrifice. Elsewhere, he uses similar imagery in a different context. Philippians chapter 2 verse 17 Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.

There, the sacrifice that Paul is being poured out upon is the sacrifice of the Philippians' faith and we might presume that the pouring out refers to his death. In this passage in 2 Timothy, the pouring out is not directly identified with the death itself but seems to be connected with it more generally.

The pouring out is the extended process that leads up to and is concluded in the death. This is another example of Paul's understanding of Christian service and ministry within a conceptual framework offered by sacrifice.

He shifts in verse 7 to a familiar imagery of athletic endeavour. He has fought the good fight. Paul might be referring to military imagery here or he might be working with the athletic metaphor.

He presents the Christian life and the task of ministry as like a race that he has run. In 1 Corinthians 9 verses 24-27 he wrote, Do you not know that in a race all the runners run but only one receives the prize?

[10 : 02] So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly.

I do not box as one beating the air but I discipline my body and keep it under control lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. Another instance of an athletic metaphor can be found in Philippians chapter 3 verses 12-14.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own but one thing I do forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Here too Paul presents the faithful running of the race that was set before him as one with a great reward the crown of righteousness a reward that will be granted to all faithful servants who look for Christ's appearing.

Paul has described Timothy as his son as one who follows his example as a son would follow his father's example presenting his own faithfulness in running the course of Christian ministry Paul wants to give Timothy something to follow.

[11 : 19] He also wants Timothy to recognize that he needs to fill the shoes of Paul as Paul leaves the scene. The charge that Paul is giving to Timothy here has many of the same elements as those in Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1 and 2.

Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Those who faithfully run this race are surrounded by many others that have done so before them. Paul is like a relay runner finishing his leg shouting a word of encouragement to the man to whom he has passed his baton.

The remainder of the chapter that mostly contains personal instructions gives a tantalizing window into the final chapter of the apostle's life. Asking Timothy to come to him soon Paul speaks of the way that he has been deserted and abandoned by some of how he's been cut off from others as they've gone to different locations and of the great testing that he has undergone in others' absence.

Demas was a Gentile fellow worker of Paul who was mentioned in Colossians chapter 4 verse 14. After having read of Demas as a faithful companion of Paul in other books we might be horrified to discover that he abandoned Paul in such a serious manner.

[12 : 44] Such love of the present age is described in 1 John chapter 2 verse 15. Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him.

Paul's judgment of Demas' motives is sobering especially considering that this is the last biblical reference to him. In contrast to Demas Crescens and Titus had likely not abandoned Paul but they had gone to other locations depriving Paul of their company and assistance.

Only Luke remained with Paul at that point. For much of the end of the book of Acts Luke had accompanied Paul in his travels and it seems that he remained with Paul at this point in Rome. If the reference to Demas in verse 10 is a saddening reference to a once faithful and stalwart companion of Paul who had fallen back and backslidden the reference to Mark in verse 11 has something of the opposite character.

Paul had refused to take John Mark as a companion on his second missionary journey not trusting him to stay the course. In Acts chapter 15 verses 37 to 40 we read of this episode.

Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark but Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work and there arose a sharp disagreement so that they separated from each other.

- [13 : 59] Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus but Paul chose Silas and departed having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. Now in the final period of his life the best part of two decades after that original confrontation with Barnabas Paul sees the value of having Mark by his side.

Just as those who are once faithful can fall back like Demas those who once fell back can prove faithful like Mark. Paul has sent Tychicus to Ephesus perhaps he is the one bearing this epistle to Timothy.

Tychicus was also the bearer of the epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians. On his way to visit Paul presumably in Rome from Asia Paul wants Timothy to pick up the cloak the parchments and the books that he left behind in Troas.

Towner describes the sort of item that Paul's cloak would have been. This garment was a heavy circular shaped cape made from goat hair hide or coarse wool for outer wear and especially important in the winter months.

It was not a garment one took lightly for it would have been relatively expensive most men owning only one such piece of clothing and it doubled as an outer protective covering for sleeping.

- [15 : 08] A person such as Paul accustomed to travel and to nights in unpredictable situations would certainly regard this garment as an essential and typical part of his kit leading to his request to have it back by winter.

Paul was a writer and a student of scripture and he requests that Timothy bring with him the books and above all the parchments. Considerable scholarly speculation has been prompted by this instruction people wondering what exactly Paul had in mind.

Are the books and parchments referring to the same item the books namely the parchments or are they two different classes of material? Do the parchments refer to Paul's own notebooks? Are the books or scrolls parts of the Old Testament scripture?

Are the early church writings maybe Paul's own writings and perhaps parts of the New Testament scripture? Such questions cannot be finally settled but they do tantalise. Paul speaks here of a character called Alexander who opposed the message of the gospel.

He warns Timothy to beware of him and he may be the same Alexander as the one mentioned in 1 Timothy chapter 1 verses 19 and 20. By rejecting this some have made shipwreck of their faith among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

- [16 : 22] Verses 16 to 18 record some of the last reliable biographical details concerning the apostle Paul. His first hearing was likely a hearing in preparation for the trial to see if there was a case to be heard.

Many historically have taken this not as a hearing but as a trial itself Paul being released as a result. There is a long historical tradition of Paul having two periods of imprisonment in Rome and what Paul describes here would be seen as the end of the first.

It is however I believe more likely that this refers to an arraignment or hearing a difficult event at which no one stood by Paul to offer moral support or evidence to back up his case.

Nevertheless the Lord was with Paul in this experience and supported him through it. Paul describes this in terms of being rescued from the lion's mouth. Towner makes the intriguing case that this is part of a larger set of allusions to Psalm 22 a psalm in terms of which Paul is describing his experience.

When we consider the importance of Psalm 22 in the context of Christ's crucifixion this becomes all the more interesting. Towner picks out a number of expressions from the psalm. My God, my God why have you forsaken me?

- [17 : 31] The forsakenness of the sufferer in Psalm 22 is connected with the abandonment of Paul in his defence. Paul's claim that through the Lord's deliverance of him the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it might be an allusion back to the Septuagint of Psalm 22 verses 27 to 28.

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord and all the families of the nations shall worship before you for kingship belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations. This reference to the kingship of the Lord is also alluded to in the heavenly kingdom of which Paul speaks in verse 18.

For Towner the principal allusion around which all of these secondary allusions cluster is found in verse 21 of the psalm Save me from the mouth of the lion. By presenting his experience in terms of the psalm Paul is articulating his struggle in terms of the righteous sufferer and most notably of Christ.

Paul's use of several terms relating to deliverance and salvation is also picking up upon the language of the psalm. The final verses conclude with some remaining greetings, instructions and news.

Priscilla and Aquila had worked alongside Paul in Acts chapter 18 and had travelled with him at various points. They had lived in several different locations, Corinth, Rome and Ephesus among them.

- [18 : 49] Anesiphorus had been mentioned back in chapter 1 as one who had shown peculiar faithfulness to Paul. Paul had there expressed his desire that the Lord would grant his household mercy. Erastus, who may be the same person as mentioned in Romans chapter 16 verse 23, was left behind in Corinth.

If he is the same person as mentioned in Romans, he was the city treasurer. Trophimus, mentioned in Acts chapter 20 verse 4, had accompanied Paul for part of his third missionary journey.

Most notably, Trophimus had inadvertently precipitated Paul's capture in Jerusalem, which had led to him being taken to Rome. The Jews believed that Paul had taken Trophimus, a Gentile, into the temple and as a result he was seized.

Given the considerable danger of travelling during the winter months, Paul wants Timothy to make his way to him as soon as possible, with the possible exception of Linus, who is identified as a Roman bishop within the tradition.

The other figures mentioned in verse 21 are not known to us and are only mentioned here in the New Testament. Paul closes his second epistle to Timothy and his final letter with a personal greeting to Timothy, the Lord be with your spirit, and then a more general greeting to Timothy and his companions, grace be with you.

- [20 : 00] A question to consider. In verses 3 and 4 Paul describes the process of drifting away from and then rejecting the truth. What are the stages that we might discern in such a process and what might be some of the signs that they are occurring?