

Sermons on 2 Timothy-Robert Morgan

2 Timothy 1 IN TIMES LIKE THESE

Last week, we ended our Sunday morning studies into the book of James, the theme of which was Faith in Action. Today I'd like to begin a new set of four messages entitled Keeping the Faith, from the book of 2 Timothy. This little book has four chapters, and so we'll devote four Sundays to it—one chapter per week, beginning today with chapter 1.

The most important thing to remember about 2 Timothy is that it represents the last extant writing of the great Apostle Paul. It's been called his last will and testament. It was written as he was facing trial and awaiting execution in Rome. I recently finished reading a biography of President John F. Kennedy, and the writer said that following his assassination in Dallas on November 22, 1963, for months afterward his aids and his staff would share their various stories of their last conversation with him. Everyone remembered the last time they had spoken with him. Everyone remembered the last thing he had said to them.

Well, think of this book of 2 Timothy as the last time the Apostle Paul speaks to us. He was writing to his younger associate, Timothy, and in chapter 4 he instructed Timothy to come to him quickly in Rome; but we don't know if Timothy made it in time. As far as we know, these are Paul's final instructions about living for Christ in what he describes in chapter 3 as "perilous times." So let's read chapter one—it has eighteen verses—and then we'll unfold it and try it on for size.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

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. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. 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.

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 did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.

So 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, who 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, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. And of this Gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That 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.

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

You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes. May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me in my chains. On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me. May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! You know very well in how many ways he helped me in Ephesus.

In the time of the Apostle Paul, Christianity was under assault. This letter was written against the backdrop of persecution.

Look at verse 8: So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me His prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the Gospel.

Look at chapter 2, verse 8: This is my Gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal.

Look at chapter 3, verse 1: But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days....

And verse 12: In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

And in chapter 4, verse 6: I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith....

Now, in a future message I want to give a glimpse of what is going on in the world today, in terms of persecution against Christians.

If the church in America really knew what was going on, and if the world media really cared about the basic human rights of Christians, there would be a far greater outcry than there is. But even here in America today, there is a growing consensus in society that Christians are dangerous idiots. Some of you are familiar with the writings of Richard Dawkins, who represents a new and fundamentalist form of atheism. Let me share with you a couple of his quotes: The virgin birth, the resurrection, the raising of Lazarus, even the Old Testament miracles, are all freely used for religious propaganda, and they are very effective with an audience of the unsophisticated and children.

He said: It should be seen as child abuse to teach children about Jesus.

Another of the new atheists is George H. Smith, who wrote: Christian theism must be rejected by any person with even a shred of respect for reason.

This kind of thinking has taken hold of America's academic institutions and much of our media, and it's creating an environment in which some people are even warning about the coming criminalizing of Christianity. Well, when the Apostle Paul wrote 2 Timothy, Christianity was criminalized. Christians faced arrest, conviction, imprisonment, and martyrdom. Christianity is criminalized in much of the world today. And when we read 2 Timothy, we're eavesdropping on a conversation between an older, imprisoned Christian and a younger one who was feeling a sense of threat and intimidation by a hostile society, and the message is incredibly relevant. The apostle Paul tells him to keep the faith.

It seems to me that if you think of this chapter—2 Timothy 1—as a piano, Paul struck four chords that represented the attitude he wanted to convey into Timothy, and it gives you and me a sense of what our attitude should.

Be Thankful (vv. 3-5)

First, let's be thankful. As incredible as it seems, this letter—which is all about peril and persecution—opens with a note of thanksgiving. Look at verses 3-5: 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. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. 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.

Sitting in that dungeon in Rome and looking back over his dramatic life, the old apostle thought of the time (recorded in Acts chapter 16) when he had showed up in the little town of Lystra. There he found a little home—a grandmother, a mother, and a 16-year-old young man (we don't really know his age, but I view him as a teenager) named Timothy. His father was apparently unsympathetic to the Christian faith, but his mother and grandmother were ardent believers. Paul wanted to take the young man with him on his second missionary journey, and somehow the women had agreed to it. I can just picture the scene in that home—young Timothy suddenly deciding to take off with this unusual evangelist, the women scurrying around helping him pack, all of it happening so quickly. And now, years had passed, and the apostle Paul was writing one last letter to this young fellow who was going to soon be his successor. And he was thankful to God for the fact that his pathway had led through the town of Lystra, that God had placed these two women there, that he had met a teenager with a heart for the Lord, and that through the years there had been unbroken fellowship and partnership with this little group of friends.

I've said many times that thanksgiving is the most therapeutic attitude we can cultivate. And on any given day, we can complain or we can praise. Now, I'm sure Paul had many specific complaints as he wrote this letter, and he alludes to some of them. But his opening statements here are positive and thankful.

Last fall, I read a story in the newspapers that was deeply moving. It was about the Medal of Honor, which is presented by the United States government to military heroes who distinguish themselves conspicuously in combat by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life and beyond the call of duty. Last fall, the first Medal of Honor awarded for combat in Afghanistan was presented to the family of Lt. Michael Murphy, a Navy SEAL who gave his life to make a radio call for help for his team. Murphy and three other SEALs went sent on a mission in June of 2005 into the rugged, 10,000-foot Afghan mountains, searching for a known terrorist. They were apparently spotted by local tribesmen who reported them to the Taliban. Murphy's team was trapped by fifty enemy

troops who surrounded them on three sides and forced them into a ravine. Soon all four men had sustained wounds and were out of ammunition.

“We were hurtin’ bad,” said the team’s sole survivor, Petty Officer 2nd Class Marcus Luttrell. “We were out of ammo, and... it was bad, it was real bad.” Murphy moved from man to man to keep his team together, though he had to expose himself to enemy fire to do so. Then, because the mountainous terrain blocked communications, he had to move into an open area to call for help. Despite incoming fire, he calmly provided his unit’s location and information about opposing force. While making the call, he took two rounds in the back and dropped the handset, but he managed to retrieve it and complete the call. He even said “thank you” at the end of the transmission.

His dad, speaking to reporters later, said, “Here is a man who had been shot in the stomach, and been fighting with this wound, gets shot in the back... and then still has the presence of mind to say ‘thank you.’”

That’s what the apostle Paul teaches us to do here. We’re in a combat situation on this earth, and Paul was about to become a casualty, but he opens his final book on a note of thanksgiving. In times like these, we must be thankful.

Be Zealous (vv. 6-7)

Second, in times like these we must be zealous. We’ve got to fan into flame the gift God has given us and get to work. Look at verses 6-7: 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 did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.

When Paul used the phrase “the laying on of my hands,” that was apparently a reference to Timothy’s ordination into the ministry. They had evidently had some kind of worship service in which Timothy acknowledge that God had called him to a special ministry as pastor or evangelist, and he had been set aside for that purpose. I’m sure that Paul had some things to say on that occasion, and then in prayer Paul had placed his hands on the young man as a symbol of the hand of God resting on him with power. We have the same traditions today in a service of ordination.

But we get the feeling here that Paul was concerned about Timothy, maybe worried that Timothy was feeling discouraged and intimidated. We can all feel that way sometimes. I had a letter several months ago from a pastor in another state who felt like quitting. It’s hard to keep on going when you get discouraged. We have to keep fanning into flame the gift that God has given to each of us. We have to remain fervent. We have to stay excited and joyful.

How can we do that? We do it through the power of the Holy Spirit. Verse 7 is one of the Bible’s great verses about the Holy Spirit: For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.

The older translations say—a spirit power, love, and of a sound mind.

The actual Greek word for sound mind or self-discipline comes from two Greek terms that have been put together. The first is the word *sodzo*, which means saved or delivered. The second term is *phroneo*, which means a person’s mind, intelligence, or way of thinking. When you put these words together, it really means having a mind that has been delivered and rescued and is now safe and secure.

I think Paul was saying to Timothy (and this is what the passage is saying to us): You might be tempted to lose your nerve, to be timid and afraid, to fall apart, to collapse, to succumb to fear. But God has given you a gift to use in your service for Him, and you’ve got to stay encouraged as the Holy Spirit infuses you with power and with love and with the ability to keep your head in all situations. Be zealous.

Be Unashamed (vv. 8-12)

The third chord that Paul strikes here is the idea of being unashamed. In times like these, be thankful, be zealous, and be unashamed. Look at verses 8-12:

So 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, who 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, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. And of this Gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That 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.

I love this part of the chapter, because right in the middle of it Paul gives one of his many periodic summaries of the Gospel. What is the message that is so important that prison and death can't stop us? It's this message. From the beginning of time, God has ordained saving grace, and it has now been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, our Savior, who by His death and resurrection destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. The problem is that for some reason that isn't a well-received message in this world. "It's why I'm suffering as I am," said Paul, "yet I am not ashamed, and you must not be ashamed either. For we know whom we have believed and are persuaded that He is able to keep what we have committed to Him against that day."

I read about a woman who had once known much of the Bible by heart, but as she grew older her memory failed. Her favorite verse in the Bible was 2 Timothy 1:12: I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.

In time, she forgot the first part of the verse, but she remembered the part that said: I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.

Then she forgot some more of the verse, but she could be heard repeated the phrase: He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him...

Finally, she only had one word of the verse, and it was the word Him. She would say: Him... Him... Him.... She had forgotten all the Bible except for that one word, but in that one word she had all of the Bible. (A story related by Dr. S. D. Gordon of "Quiet Talks" fame, and retold in Knight's Master Book of New Illustrations by Walter B. Knight (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing House, 1956), 14.)

It's our crown and glory and joy.

Jesus, and shall it ever be
A mortal man ashamed of Thee?
Ashamed of Thee, whom angels praise,
Whose glories shine through endless days?

In times like these, we must be thankful, zealous, unashamed, and finally vigilant.

Be Vigilant (vv. 13-14)

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

Notice these two words—keep and guard. This is a remarkable passage. As we just saw up in verse 12, we have entrusted some things to the Lord Jesus—our lives and our work for Him—and He is able to keep and to guard it. But in the next verse—verse 13—He has entrusted some things into our care—specifically His Gospel and His message—and we must vigilantly keep and guard it.

When Paul talks about the "pattern of sound teaching," he is talking about our doctrine and theology. It's very easy to adjust our theology according to the winds of whatever is culturally relevant or politically correct. But that we cannot do. Our doctrine and our Biblical teachings may have different applications, but our Bibles remain infallible and inerrant, and our doctrine isn't subject to blowing winds of change.

Now, Paul ended this chapter by giving us two examples of men who had caved into cultural pressure—Phygelus and Hermogenes. We don't know anything more about these men; this is the only time they are mentioned in the Bible. But apparently they were two Christians in the city of Ephesus whom Paul had relied on, and to his amazement they had deserted him in the current crisis.

On the other hand, there was one very bold believer who surprised Paul by his courage—Onesiphorus: May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me in my chains. On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me. May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! You know very well in how many ways he helped me in Ephesus.

So there you have chapters 1 of 2 Timothy, and the lessons are so very relevant to our own day, when so many Christian young people go off to college and are influenced by liberal professors, when so many American church attenders become distracted by the things of this world and drift away, when so much persecution and intimidation is facing us as Christian believers. In the last days, said Paul, perilous times will come. But in times like these, we need to stay thankful, zealous, unashamed, and vigilant. In times like these we need a Savior; in times like these we need an anchor. Let's be very sure our anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!

2 Timothy 3:1-17 BUT AS FOR YOU

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. 2 Timothy 3:1

We are in an election year as you know, and there's one thing that makes this year different from any other presidential election we've ever had in this country, and that's the proliferation of pundits and bloggers. We've always had pundits, of course, but never as many as there are this year, due to the growth of the cable news networks. And there has been an explosion of political bloggers, some on the right, some of the left, and some professing to be independent. But all of them are giving an on-going analysis of our society as they see it. Every day there are thousands of blogs dissecting and explaining our culture and our politics and our society at this moment in our history. This is the era of the blogger and it is reshaping the political life of America and the very way in which politics is done on our nation.

Well, today I'd like for you to think of God as a blogger. His blog is called the Holy Bible, and in this blog He offers His analysis of our society. He explains what's going on in the world and where we're headed in human history. In His blog, He reveals what's in the human heart and what's in the divine mind. And in His blog we have His comments and His analysis of our age. This is particularly the way I'd like for us to look at the chapter we're coming to today in our study through the book of 2 Timothy. We're in a series called "Keeping the Faith," from 2 Timothy—four chapters and four Sundays. And today we are in 2 Timothy 3, and here the Lord offers an authoritative analysis of our times.

Rotten to the Core (vv. 1-9)

The chapter begins with a warning that our society is rotten to the core. He says in verse 1: But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.

When you see that phrase the last days in the New Testament, it typically refers to the period of time between the Day of Pentecost and the Second Coming of Christ. On the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit descended on the church and Peter stood up to explain it all to the assembled multitude, he said that the outpouring of the Spirit was the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy about the Last Days.

The writer of Hebrews began his book by saying that while in the past God has spoken through the prophets in various ways at various times, in these last days He has spoken to us through His Son.

Peter warned that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts and ridiculing the idea that Christ was coming back.

And here in 2 Timothy, Paul said that in the last days perilous times would come, and he was warning Timothy of current events.

So the Last Days began with the Day of Pentecost and will end with the Second Coming of Christ, and it seems to me that if Peter and Paul thought they were living in the last days, you and I must be living in the last days of the last days. What kind of time is this going to be? It's going to be a terrible time.

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.

The older translations say that in the last days perilous times will come. The Greek word used here means days of great difficulty, days of violence. This word is only used one other time in the Bible, and that's in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 8, when Jesus went into the region of the Gadarenes and encountered two demon-possessed men who were very violent. They were so violent

that people avoided passing through that area. The word “violent” in Matthew 8 is the same word that is translated “terrible” or “perilous” here in 2 Timothy 3. And the next word tells us why the last days will be terrible and perilous and violent—it’s people.

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People....

And now the Lord is going to give us a list of nineteen characteristics which describe people in the last days.

People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

Now, we don’t have time to look at all nineteen characteristics, but just notice the last one: Having a form of godliness, but denying its power. In other words, in the last days people are going to be very religious, yet they will deny the true power of the God of the Bible.

From time to time, I try to warn about the terrible evil of internet pornography. It’s unbelievable how many internet sites are devoted to pornography, and this is a major industry around the world and a major threat to our children. But I read the other day something that surprised me. According to a report on CNN, there are actually more internet sites devoted to religion than to pornography. With the click of a mouse, you can suddenly summon up any one of thousands of sects and cults and religions—millions upon millions of electronic pages—devoted to an ever growing number of religions. Never in human history has there been such a proliferation of religious information. Our world has never been more religious than it is now. People have a form of godliness, but they deny its power. It isn’t real Gospel-faith. It’s not real Christ-serving, heaven-going, life-changing, behavior-transforming faith.

Well, the chapter goes on to describe these people further:

They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.

What a powerful assessment of our age. We are the best educated people of history—every learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.

Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses [these were two of the magicians in Pharaoh’s court who according to Hebrew history tried to compete with the miracles of Moses], so also these men oppose the truth—men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone.

So the last days, according to the Bible, will be characterized by perilous times filled with morally-flawed men and morally-weak women, lovers of themselves, lovers of pleasure, ever learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. That’s the Bible’s analysis of our age, given here in 2 Timothy 3:1-9.

Solid to the Core (vv. 10-13)

Now, here’s the second thing about the Last Days. While our society will be rotten to the core, the Lord says there will be some extraordinary people who will be solid to the core. Without any shame or embarrassment, Paul points to himself as an example for this for Timothy to follow:

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kind of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.

The Bible used nineteen different terms to describe a society that was rotten to the core, but only nine terms are necessary to describe someone who is solid to the core. It begins with our teaching: You, however, know all about my teaching. Good character flows out of right thinking, and right thinking is produced by correct teaching and sound doctrine. That leads to a godly lifestyle, a deep sense of purpose, and qualities such as faith, patience, love, and endurance.

Now, here’s the issue. What happens when a society that is rotten to the core is confronted by the people of God who are solid to the core? The answer is in the next verse:

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to

worse, deceiving and being deceived.

Here is the primary point Paul is making—when a society that is rotten to the core confronts Christians who are solid to the core, they only know how to do one thing—and that is to persecute them. And this has been the pattern over and over again in Christian history.

The apostle Paul was writing this from a prison cell in Rome during the days of Emperor Nero. Nero was a blond, blue-eyed young man who became the most powerful man in the world—the emperor of Rome—when he was only sixteen years old, due to the political intrigues and machinations of his mother, who was a ruthless, ambitious woman (and whom he later murdered). Nero came to the throne in AD 54; and ten years later, in July of AD 64, a great fire started at the southeastern end of the Circus Maximus in shops selling flammable goods. The flames spread quickly and burned for five days, destroying much of the city of Rome. When the citizens of Rome began blaming Nero for the fire, he accused the Christians of having started it. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular.

Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car.

This was the beginning of widespread, state-sponsored persecution against Christians, the first of the great persecutions against Christians. Of course, there was opposition to Christianity in the city of Jerusalem from the Day of Pentecost, and isolated incidents of persecution in the life and travels of Paul. But here, in the days of Nero, we had the first widespread campaign to eradicate Christianity in the Roman Empire, and during the reign of Nero, both Paul and Peter were executed.

There have been horrendous periods of persecution throughout Christian history, and it will change your life to study the stories and the heroes of these periods. But what Paul is saying here is that these periods of persecution are not aberrations in history; they are the norm. Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Persecution is the normal state of affairs when it comes to a holy church living in a depraved world.

Now let me give you what I consider to be a startling statistic.

In the first 1900 years of Christianity, from the book of Acts until the year 1900, we can estimate that 25 million people died for their faith in Christ. They were killed or assassinated or executed or tortured to death just because they were believers in Jesus.

And then in the 20th century, in this one span of 100 years—an estimated 45 million more people died for their faith in Christ. In other words, more Christians were martyred in the 20th century than in all 19 previous centuries combined.

And that's nothing to what is happening in the 21st century. Right now, there are reported to be 600 million Christians who are facing persecution for their faith.

According to the organization, Open Doors, the Number One persecutor of Christians in the world today is North Korea. No one really knows what is happening there, but local sources on the group estimate that there are somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000 believers still alive in North Korea despite years of massacre, slaughter, and torture. As many as one-fourth of all North Korean Christians are imprisoned.

The persecution of Christians is primarily taking place in communist countries like North Korea, China, Cuba, and the countries of Southeast Asia. And in all 55 or so of the predominately Islamic countries. And in countries with pockets of militant Hindu and Buddhist sects.

What about here in the West? We seldom encounter physical persecution but there is clearly an increasing amount of anti-Christian

bias in our society, and it's beginning to become codified in our laws and legal system. Recently when a Christian pastor in Canada wrote a commentary on the Bible's perspective on homosexuality, a government commission ordered him to renounce his faith and apologize.

No long ago, a family-owned photography studio in New Mexico refused on religious grounds to take pictures of a same-sex wedding ceremony. They were fined over \$6,000. There are lots of implications and indications that these trends are increasing in our society.

- School children are forbidden to pray before football games
- Nativity scenes are banned from the public square
- The media routinely ridicules and demonizes Christian politicians
- Hollywood caricatures Christians as Bible-thumping bigots
- Professors who believe in intelligent design are ostracized and denied tenure at the universities
- A new militant atheism is taking over academia, and in thousands of classrooms secular professors consider it their personal mission to destroy the faith of Christian college students.

It's not the same as the blatant persecution occurring in other nations, but it is just as dangerous and just as wrong. And according to 2 Timothy 3, this is what happens when a society that's rotten to the core meet a group of people—believers in Jesus Christ—who are solid to the core. It always results in persecution.

But As For You (vv. 14-17)

So what do we do? How do we respond? Well that's what the rest of the chapter is about. I love these next four words: But as for you.... Here is your responsibility and mine.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

We stay strong and steady for two reasons. First, we have a good heritage. Notice the way Paul put it here: But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it....

For 2000 years, a succession of faithful martyrs and persecuted saints has faithfully handed down the Gospel to us. They endured prison and fire and sword, and with broken and bloody hands they have handed it to us.

The second reason we stay strong and steady is because we have a message that is true and trustworthy. All Scripture is God-breathed.... That is, it has been inspired and given by God. This is His infallible and inerrant word. It's His message to the human race. It makes us wise unto salvation and it gives us the doctrine, correction, and instruction we need to be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

This is one of the most important verses in the entire Bible on the subject of the divine inspiration of Scripture, and next year I'm planning to preach a message just from this one verse. But for now, the overall point of this chapter is this: We live in terrible times, but we have to be true-blue to Christ, whatever the cost. The reason we can do that is because the truth of the Gospel has been handed down to us by those we trust, and the Word of the Gospel has been breathed out by a God that we trust. And so we can say: Faith of our fathers, holy faith! We will be true to thee till death.

This week I read of a man in China who became a Christian through the witness of a Norwegian missionary. When he was 17, he was arrested for preaching the Gospel, but he wasn't daunted; and after his release he continued preaching. One day he went out with two others to a mountainous province of China to preach, and he in his first service in this area he preached about the cross of Jesus Christ. There was actually a large cross that had been suspended to the wall in that place.

Later in the day as he rested the thought about his message, he heard a loud noise. Several police officers burst into his room, jerked him up, and took a rope, tying it tightly around his chest, back, and waist. They also bound his arms behind his back.

One of the officers saw the cross and they tore it from the wall and tied it to his back with the ropes. Then they started kicking him, and the blows tore into his ribs and legs and chest. They dragged him out of the room and marched him through the streets. In the town square, he was forced to his knees and kicked until he fell unconscious; but his witness has reported led to many people coming to Christ—and he had the surreal privilege of bearing the cross for the one who had borne the cross for him.

There's a sense in which we all have that privilege. Jesus said, "If anyone would follow Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me."

Are you ready to do that?

2 Timothy 3-4

STAYING SOUND IN A SECULAR WORLD

I'm taking a few Sundays this fall to deal with some difficult issues relating to Christians living in a pagan society. Two weeks ago, we looked at the subject, "Staying Moral in an Immoral World" and last week we dealt with the topic: "Staying Revived in a Dying Age." Now today I want to speak on the subject, "Staying Sound in a Secular Age," and my message will be an exposition of one of the last paragraphs coming from the pen of the Apostle Paul, in 2 Timothy 3 and 4:

All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Timothy 3:12 – 4:5).

Recently, the Episcopalians made headlines when they voted to ordain Rev. Gene Robinson as an openly-homosexual bishop for New Hampshire. Many of us have wondered how they could do such a thing in good conscience, since the Bible repeatedly condemns homosexual activity among consenting adults. The answer is found in something Gene Robinson said. I'm quoting him directly now: "We have many times departed from tradition and Scripture. Just simply saying it departs from tradition and Scripture does not necessarily make it wrong. We worship a living God and that living God leads us into truth."

Now, when he talks about tradition, he is talking about the traditional teachings of the historic church which, in the Catholic and Anglican denominations, are more binding than they are for us who hold to the Word of God alone as our authority. But if we omit that part about "traditions" here's what we hear Gene Robinson saying: "Simply because it departs from Scripture doesn't make it wrong. We have departed from Scripture many times. Our living God isn't bound by the Scriptures. He leads us to new truth, new standards, new ideals, new veracities."

The leading Episcopalian in the United States is Bishop Frank Griswold. In an interview with the Associated Press, he said, "I don't think the Bible pretends to be the rule book, the history book, the container of all factual truth. It's the description of people's encounter with God."

In other words, the Holy Bible has some good things to say—but it cannot be trusted when it comes to rules, history, or factual truth. It is not an infallible or inerrant document, and therefore it isn't binding for all times and seasons. It is a wonderful book, but it is not authoritative. The real issue in the recent Episcopalian debate is not so much the issue of homosexuality but of the authority of the Word of God.

This line of reasoning goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. The first attack of the tempter was aimed at the authority of the Word of God. In Genesis 3:1, we have the first recorded words of the Devil: "Yea, hath God said...?" And Paul tells us here in 2 Timothy that attacks on the authority of the Scriptures will characterize the last days.

The Inspiration of Scripture

Let's look at his central declaration in verse 16—the greatest verse in the Bible on the subject of the inspiration of the Scripture. The verse begins with the Greek words “Pasa Graphe.” Pasa: all—and Graphe: Scripture. Graphe is the word from which we get our English words graphics and graph and graphite, the material used for pencil lead. This is the word the New Testament uses to designate the Holy Writings.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. This six-word phrase, “is given by inspiration of God” is one word in the Greek. In the Greek New Testament, you would read the words: Pasa Graphe Theopneustos. “Every Scripture Theopneustos.” This is a very important word, so I need to ask you to indulge my delving into the original Greek as Paul wrote it. It is vitally important for us to understand it. It comes from two smaller Greek words. The first is Theos, meaning God. The second half of the word is from the Greek word Pneuma. The “P” is silent. This is the word from which we get a lot of our English words, like pneumonia and pneumatic. It means wind or air or breath. As a verb, it means to blow or to breathe, literally to exhale. This verse literally says: All Scripture is God-breathed, or all Scripture is breathed out by God.

When I am speaking, what am I doing? I'm simply exhaling and using my mouth and tongue to form certain sounds called words with my exhaled breath. So we can say about 2 Timothy 3:16: Every word of the Scripture has been breathed out, spoken out, by God.

How did God do it? What was the process through which God breathed out the Scriptures. That question is answered in 2 Peter 1:20:

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation...

I'm reading this verse in the New King James Version, and in my humble opinion that is a very unfortunate translation of the Greek. Peter said literally, “No prophecy of the Scripture is of any private epilysis. The root word is luo—to loose. It means literally, to let something loose, to release something. If you have a New King James Version with marginal notes, notice that it has a secondary meaning notated in the margin: Origin. No prophecy of Scripture is of any private origin. In other words, the idea isn't interpretation but origination. The New Living Translation says: “No prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophets themselves.”

Verse 21: For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved [borne along] by the Holy Spirit.

This does not mean that the Holy Spirit simply dictated the Bible to these men who were borne along by the Spirit. We don't hold to the dictation theory of Scripture, because according to that theory, the Bible writers were almost totally passive. God just dictated the words and they passively wrote them down. If I were a famous statesman or business executive with a dozen secretaries, I might use them all to take dictation. If you received a letter from me which had been transcribed by Alice and you received another letter from me that had been transcribed by Betty and a third that had been transcribed by Christy, they would all sound more or less the same. From the contents of the letter itself you wouldn't be able to tell who the transcriber was.

But when you read the Bible, the authors of the various books write with their own personalities. Isaiah's writings are majestic, Jeremiah's are melancholy, Moses writes with authority, John writes with tenderness, Mark's style is brief and quick, Luke's style is analytical and historical.

And it is in this fact that we have the miracle of the Bible—it is both human and divine. It is written by human authors in their own contexts and using their own personalities, yet every word is breathed out from God.

Here's the way the theologian, Frank Gaebelin, put it:

“The doctrine of plenary inspiration holds that the original documents of the Bible were written by men, who, though permitted the exercise of their own personalities and literary talents, yet wrote under the control and guidance of the Spirit of God, the result being in every word of the original documents a perfect and errorless recording of the exact message God desired to give man.”

The Inerrancy of Scripture

Now, you can see that this definition of inspiration plainly implies inerrancy and infallibility in the original documents. If God Himself—who is altogether perfect—superintended the writing of His Word down to the very words used, though without suspending the personality and cultural contexts of the human writers—than we would expect His Words and His Word to be perfect and without error.

Jesus certainly felt that way. Let's look at what Jesus said about the Scripture. Look at Matthew 4, our Lord's conflict with the devil on the Mount of Temptation:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written..." [And now Jesus is going to quote from the Old Testament, from the book of Deuteronomy] "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

He did not say "some words," but "every word." Jesus understood that the nature of inspiration meant that every word had come from God Himself, and therefore could be trusted to be true and infallible.

Turn to the next chapter, Matthew 5. This is our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. Look at what He said in verse 17: "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly [that word means this is absolutely the way it is; this is absolutely a true statement] I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled."

What is a jot and what is a tittle? A jot was the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and a tittle was the smallest stroke used in making a Hebrew letter.

Jesus was affirming the trustworthiness of even the smallest letters that made up the words that made up the Holy Scriptures.

The Authority of Scripture

Now, let's take our logic a step further. If the Word of God is inspired, then it is infallible and inerrant. If it is infallible and inerrant, then it is authoritative. It possesses divine authority. It speaks for God Himself. It is God's decrees, God's commands, God's truths, God's very words. It is the rule of our faith and our practice. What does that mean? It means a lot of things, but there are two that I'm going to mention this morning.

First, it means we have a responsibility to be wise interpreters of Scripture. We're to rightly divide the Word. If we're going to take life-or-death positions based on the sheer authority of Scripture alone, we must make sure we are reading it carefully and interpreting it correctly. We can't just pull a verse out of context and establish a rule, a standard, or a conviction. We have to make sure we are rightly dividing the text.

Second, once we do know what the Bible says and we're confident that we're interpreting it correctly, the truth of Scripture becomes the final word of authority. What determines my personal beliefs, my behaviors, my decisions, my actions?

Is it my personal preferences? What I want to do? What I feel like doing? No, it's what the Bible says.

Is it what the United States Government says? Is it what the U.S. Supreme Court decrees? No, it's what the Bible says.

Is it what the media and our cultural elite tell us is politically correct? No, it's what the Bible says.

There are times when the truths of God's Word run counter to my personal preferences, to the United States Supreme Court, and to what is currently politically correct. But the message of the Bible is inspired, inerrant, infallible, and authoritative. It's a solid rock in the middle of an ocean of uncertainty, and on this rock we stand.

The Indestructibility of the Scripture

That brings us to another truth about the Bible—it's indestructibility. Heaven and earth will pass away. The opinions of the wise and foolish will come and go. Kings and courts will rise and fall. But the Word of God abides forever.

In the days of the Roman Empire, Roman authorities sought to find ways of crushing Christianity once and for all. It was suggested that all the Christians in the world be rounded up and burned to death. But one spokesman in the Emperor's Council responded, "It is no use to burn the Christians, for if you burn every Christian alive today and leave a single copy of the Scriptures remaining, the Christian Church will spring up again tomorrow."

So a great effort was made to destroy the Word of God. In the great persecution in AD 303 under Emperor Diocletian, it was decreed that every copy of the Bible in the whole world was to be sought out and destroyed. Thousands of Christian families were

martyred for possessing portions of God's Word. The killing and destruction went on for two years, and finally a victory column was erected over the ashes of a Bible with words that indicated that the Bible was now extinct.

But less than 20 years later, Diocletian was "extinct" and the Emperor Constantine proclaimed the Bible to be the Word of God for the Roman Empire. Today there are great efforts being made to discredit the Word of God. But His Word still stands, and it will evermore endure. It is inextinguishable, indestructible, imperishable. As someone once wrote:

Hammer away, ye hostile hands,
Your hammers break, God's anvil stands.

The Power of Scripture

That brings us back to our text for today, and to the subject of the power of God's Word. If the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it is inerrant and infallible. It is authoritative, and it is indestructible. The net implication is that it is also powerful—powerful enough to change a person's life forever. Look at the way Paul puts it here in 2 Timothy 3:

From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

First, he says that the Bible gives us the information we need to be saved; and then it gives us the doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction we need to grow to maturity. It equips us for everything God wants us to do on this planet.

During the past few months, I've been in frequent correspondence with a gentleman named Ted Seymore who wants to arrange a series of music festivals and evangelistic rallies in Northeast India, in which I would be the speaker. He and his wife flew to Nashville last weekend for the first in a series of planning meetings. Katrina and I entertained them, and in the course of our time together I asked him how he had become a Christian.

Ted told us that he had grown up in the greater London area, in a town just to the south of London. As a teenager, he became a ruffian and hung out with a group of rowdy kids. They were a street gang. One day in 1953, when Ted was 15 years old, an evangelist named Charles Kingston came into the town to conduct an evangelistic crusade in a tent—an old-time tent meeting. Ted Seymour and his buddies decided to break up the meeting by sneaking around the outside of the tent one night, pulling up the tent stakes, and causing the tent to collapse on the heads of those inside. But they were caught in the act. Instead of marching the boys to the police station, they were forced to attend the meeting that night and to sit on the back row.

There were two big signs hanging inside the tent. One was John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The other sign was Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Those verses also became the theme of Charles Kingston's sermon that night, and as he preached, the young 15-year-old ruffian realized that God loved him, that Jesus had died for him, and that he was facing an eternal decision as to whether to accept or reject the Savior of the world. And that was the night God changed his life forever. And Ted Seymour has devoted over half-century to serving God in remarkable ways around the world.

That's the power of God's Word. It can take a teenage gang member, give him peace, hope, and joy, and turn him into a godly man with a passion for worldwide evangelism. The Apostle Paul once said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes." It's able to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

The power of the Gospel can penetrate your life right now. The authority of Scripture can bring your life under control. Will you submit to it? Will you obey it? Will you come?

2 Timothy 3

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED FOR?

Today we're coming to the end of our Forty Days of Purpose campaign, having discovered and investigated the five great purposes

for which we have been planted on earth. It's important to remember that our time on earth is brief. As Rick Warren says, we're here on temporary assignment; the end of our active tour of duty could come at any time. Our church is sitting on the corner of yesterday and tomorrow, at the intersection of time and eternity. The great question we've tried to answer as we finish this campaign is—what purpose do we want to fulfill during our span on earth? What passions do we want to live out? Put another way: What do we want to be remembered for?

Last week, the governor of South Carolina created a stink, so to speak, by carrying two pigs into the Statehouse, signifying his frustration with the pork-barrel politics of the South Carolina legislature. Some are saying now that the stunt backfired, and critics are now charging that the governor's legacy will be reduced to an image of his toting pigs. One of the newspaper columnists said, "Is that really what the governor wants to be remembered for?"

In preparing this sermon, I took a few minutes to search the internet for newspaper obituaries containing the words: will be remembered for. I wondered what a survey of such notices would tell me. Most of the statements were like: "He will be remembered for his generous spirit." Or "She will be remembered for her acts of kindness." But there were a few rather odd statements in some of the obituaries.

One woman will be remembered for playing the same character for 25 years in a soap opera. Another man will be remembered for making a massive contribution to Scottish Dance Music. One strange obituary said, So-and-so "will be forever remembered for his unrealized potential." Another said: "He will be remembered for getting his B.A. Degree in Communications that he never did anything with."

Paul Brandt has a song entitled: "What I Want To Be Remembered For." The lyrics say:

I want to live with my eyes open,
When I'm down never quit hoping,
Keep the faith, keep the fire,
Raise the bar a little higher;
And most of all when all is said and done,
And I stand at heaven's door—loving You,
That's what I want to be remembered for.

Well, today I'd like to show what the Apostle Paul himself wanted to be remembered for, and I think we can learn some final lessons there for our Purpose-Driven Lives. There were eight characteristic that he listed, and I'd like to deal with each one briefly. This list is found in Paul's last extant writing, in the book of 2 Timothy. He was in prison, on death row, awaiting execution. He wrote his final letter to his student, disciple, and protégé, Timothy. Notice what he said in 2 Timothy 3:

But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecution I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But you must continue in the things you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Usually when we preach or teach from this passage, we focus on the latter verses and the great teachings they contain about the inspiration of the Bible: All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.... But this morning I'd like to show you the earlier verses that we frequently overlook. Notice how the apostle begins: But you have carefully followed....

Paul was aware of the fact that his life had made a mark on Timothy, that he had been watched, this his life had been an example and model for another. So are yours and mine. None of us may ever be famous, but there's a good chance that we'll influence someone who will influence someone who will influence someone who will do great things for the Lord—greater than we'll ever know. This week I've been reading the biography of Dr. Paul Carlson, a missionary physician in the Congo who was slain for his faith. A member of our church, Ron Meyers, worked for many years in Congo and was a colleague of Dr. Carlson's. Well, the death of Paul Carlson had a profound influence around the world. He was only 36 years old, but God greatly used his murder to advance the cause of Christ in Africa. The thing that struck me, however, as I read his biography is the influence that others had previously had on his life. For example, Clarence and Florence Johnson, overseers of the summer Bible camp that Paul Carlson attended every year as a teenager, were highly influential during his formative years. No one may ever write a biography of Clarence and

Florence Johnson. There may never be a building dedicated to their memory or a memorial in their honor. But they once had a high school student whose pathway crossed their own on a repeated basis; and whether they realized it or not, Paul Carlson was mentored by them; and like young Timothy, he carefully followed their example.

Then I thought of all the Christian biographies on my shelves. I have seven or eight shelves packed with biography, much of it Christian in nature. Many of these books are about people who are household names in the world today; but in every biography, hidden away on page 27 or 34 or 74 is the name of some man or woman whose influence behind the scenes was invaluable and irreplaceable. The Bible says that none of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself. Like it or not, we leave our mark on other lives. We don't always know who is watching us, though in Paul's case, he knew that at least one person was watching him, one person was being inspired by his example—his young disciple, Timothy. So he wrote, saying, "Timothy, I know that you have carefully watched me, you have carefully followed my..."—and then he went on to list the eight critical qualities that represented his legacy.

Our Doctrine

He begins with doctrine. He was saying, "I want to be remembered for believing the right things, for having a grasp on what is really true." This is foundational, for it's impossible to live correctly if you believe incorrectly. The Postmodern generation says, "It isn't important which system of truth you follow so long as it works for you. No system of truth is right or wrong; it may be right or wrong for you, but there is no absolute truth, so whatever works for you is great."

We may call that kind of thinking "postmodern," but it's really very, very old. In Paul's day, there were many varieties of teachings going around, and the apostle was greatly concerned about this. Look at the way he emphasized the subject of doctrine in his two letters to Timothy.

1 Timothy 1:3: As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine.

1 Timothy 1:10: ...for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine.

1 Timothy 4:1: Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons.

1 Timothy 4:6: If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.

1 Timothy 4:13: Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.

1 Timothy 4:16: Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine.

1 Timothy 5:17: Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.

1 Timothy 6:1: Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed.

1 Timothy 6:3: If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing.

2 Timothy 3:10: But you have carefully followed my doctrine.

2 Timothy 3:16: All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine...

2 Timothy 4:3: For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine....

Paul said, "I want to be remembered as someone who guarded very carefully the true doctrine of the Gospel." He was saying, in effect, "You cannot understand me without understanding my doctrine." In the same way, it is impossible to understand without understanding our doctrine. It is impossible to explain my life and yours apart from the doctrine we hold and the truth we believe and

the Scriptures we embrace. Whatever happens, we are absolutely in irrevocably committed to the pure doctrine of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. In a world of liberalism and compromise and postmodern political correctness, we hold to the infallibility of the inspired Scripture and to the doctrine of justification by grace through faith—and nothing or no one can pry those things from our fingers.

Our Manner of Life

Second, Paul says, “You have carefully followed my manner of life.” This is one word in the Greek, and it is an interesting word: *ἁγῆ* (*agōgē*). Transliterated into English, it is our word “agony.” It originally seems to have been a word connected with traveling, and was sometimes translated carriage, voyage, passing by, proceeding, or movement. It came to mean one’s course of life. Sometimes that course of life was hard, and so it gradually evolved to have, in English, a meaning of agony. But in its plain interpretation, it means conduct. Behavior. Way of life or lifestyle. What Paul meant was, “You have known how I have lived my life under any and all circumstances. You have carefully followed my conduct.”

We learn best by watching how others do things. That’s why the cooking shows are so popular on television. I can pick up a book of recipes and try to make something, but it really helps to watch someone else sauté onions, mince garlic, knead dough, bake a pie crust, or in some cases boil water. “Oh, so that’s how you do it!” We learn best by observing others. That’s why God put little children in homes, so that by observing their godly parents, children might know how to live.

Someone is watching your conduct and mine; and that’s why our lifestyle needs to be biblical and holy and wholesome. Let me just ask you two questions: What one behavior of yours would you most like your children or your friends to emulate? What one behavior of yours are you ashamed of and don’t want your children or friends to emulate?

How you answer those questions says a lot about you. We’ve got to fertilize the fruitful habits and weed out the harmful ones. Because someone is going to carefully follow our example one way or the other.

Our Purpose

Paul’s third characteristic was his purpose. You have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose....

This has been the focus of the last forty days, and by now I hope we’ll never forget our purposes for being on this earth. We’re happiest when we are fulfilling the purposes for which we are made. Suppose I had a mailbox up here. There’s a lot I could do with it. I could use it as to store a loaf of bread in my kitchen. I could sit it on its end and use it as an umbrella stand. I could bring it here to church and pass it through the pews to take up the offering. I suppose it could be used as a spittoon.

But it would be ugly and out-of-place being used in those ways, for a mailbox is designed for one great purpose—to receive and send out information—letters and cards and such. Paul was made to receive the message of God, to preach the Gospel, and to plant churches. You and I have a purpose to fulfill, and we’re only truly happy when we are doing those things for which we are made.

Our Faith

Fourth, Paul said, “You have carefully followed my faith.” Paul’s faith was seen in his ability to trust God whatever the circumstances. Think of a pair of scales. Place on one side all the painful perplexities that you face. In Paul’s case, it would be a long series of weights on the scale. He was rejected. He was flogged and beaten. He was arrested. He was driven like a fugitive from town to town without family and sometimes with few friends. He faced jeering. Even many in the church were critical of him, and in many ways he lived a hard, hard life. In the final analysis, he was beheaded.

But God spoke to Paul and through Paul, giving him some of the greatest promises in the Bible. Just think of the Pauline promises that we cherish to this day.

- All things work together for good to those who love God.
- My God is able to meet all your needs according to His glory in Christ Jesus.
- You know that your work in the Lord is not in vain.
- God is able to do exceedingly, abundantly more than all we could ask or request.
- There is laid up for us a crown of righteousness.
- To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

We can take just one of those promises—the smallest one, a promise containing only one little sentence of a few words or syllables

—and when we drop it on the other side of the scale, immediately the whole contraption reverses angle with a powerful thud. One little promise of God weighs more than all the problems, perils, and perplexities that life can hand you.

Visualize the scales in your life. On the one side are all your painful perplexities. On the other side are all God's powerful promises. Little-faith focuses on the painful perplexities while glancing occasionally at the powerful promises. But great-faith focuses on the powerful promises while glancing occasionally at the painful perplexities.

Paul said, "You have carefully followed my pattern of focusing on the promises of God which have daily tilted the scale of my emotions to calm confidence, even in the face of all my painful perplexities. You have carefully followed my faith." Do you have such a faith that others can emulate?

Our Longsuffering

Next: Longsuffering. Throughout his life and career, Paul had to put up with two things—imperfect circumstances and imperfect people. He knew Timothy was watching him as he continually responded to these imperfect circumstances and immature people, and he could testify that he had been "longsuffering."

What is longsuffering? Are you longsuffering? To be longsuffering means to put up with imperfect circumstances without losing your temper and to put up with immature people without showing irritation. That's it in a nutshell. Is that you?

Our Love

The next attitude Paul mentioned was his love. I'm not sure how loving Paul was by nature, but he developed a loving heart through the gradual inner workings of the Holy Spirit in his life. Look at chapter 1, verse 7: For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love....

Our Perseverance

Then there's the great quality of perseverance—the refusal to give up, the refusal to give in. I saw a newspaper in Harvard, Massachusetts, that sponsors an annual awards' night for local high school athletes. Various trophies are handed out and accomplishments are honored. The organizers of this night have created a new category. They now give out a Perseverance Award for selected students who have been injured or faced adversity, but who haven't given up and, as a result, have made significant comebacks. Paul would have won the perseverance award; he just never gave up. He never succumbed to discouragement, and he kept going despite every kind of imaginable problem. Every Christian who has ever made a difference in this world is eligible for the Perseverance Award. It's a critical quality. Paul just kept right on going, and so should we. He said to Timothy, "You have carefully followed my perseverance."

Our Persecutions and Afflictions

The old apostle then ended with one quality that doesn't spring from within but from without. Of these eight qualities, seven of them are internal, but the final one is external—persecution, affliction, opposition.

Now, who could possibly hate someone whose life was characterized by the above seven qualities—doctrine, behavior, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, and perseverance? Those are the qualities that makes a person truly great. Who would oppose someone like that?

The answer? Look at the preceding paragraph, at chapter 3, verses 1ff: But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, always learning but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith; but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all, as theirs was.

But you have carefully followed my doctrine... etc.

There are two groups of people in the world, and both serve as models for others. The first group is full of this world, characterized by this world, and esteemed by this world. But the other group is other-worldly—and Paul said to Timothy, "Don't follow that first group. Carefully follow me. Emulate me. Emulate my doctrine, my behavior, my purpose, my faith, my longsuffering, my love, my perseverance. And in the process expect to be persecuted by the people I've just described in verses 1-9."

As we end these Forty Days, we as individuals and as a church should be more thoroughly in the second camp than ever before so that everyone around us can emulate our example.

It's like something that happened one day in the life of the British preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon. He was walking up Norwood Hill with a friend. Some distance ahead of them, they could see a lamplighter. In the old days, the streets were lit by gas lamps, and the lamps had to be lit by hand every evening. Spurgeon watched the lamplighter until the old fellow had climbed the hill, lighting one lamp after another until he had crossed over the top and was out of sight. Pondering for a moment, Spurgeon turned to his companion and said, "I hope my life will be just like that. I should like to think that when I've gone over the brow of the hill I shall leave lights shining behind me."

May we live our lives and build our church with greater purpose and passion, so that when we have crossed over the brow of the hill, we shall leave a long, long row of lights shining behind us.

2 Timothy 3:16

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.²
Timothy 3:16

A couple of weeks ago while traveling in Japan for a missionary retreat, I took a flight from Tokyo to Sapporo, and there was one other person on the flight who appeared to be English speaking. I greeted him as we got on the plane, but we didn't have seats near each other. Later, as we were waiting at baggage claim, I spoke to him. He was a young man, probably 20 years old, from New Zealand. He was on holiday from school and was coming to Sapporo to ski. He asked what I did for a living, and I told him I was a pastor and, in the process, tried to say a word for the Lord. I'll confess that it probably wasn't my most lucid attempt at witnessing. I'd been in transit for a full 24 hours and my mind wasn't working very well. But at any rate, his response was, "Are you one of those people who believe that Christianity is the only truth and that you alone have the truth?"

"No," I said. "All truth is God's truth, wherever it is found. Two plus two equals four, and that's not a Bible verse. That's just a mathematical truth that's found in the universe. It's true on earth and it's true on the moon. But in the same way, the Bible is true. What the Bible says is the truth of God revealed in Scripture. It's the truth about life."

"Well," he said, "I don't really need that. I'm happy with my life as it is. My life is pretty complete without that."

We didn't have time to talk further because his baggage came and he left, but that young man gave me one of the best definitions of secularism that I've ever heard. Our world is increasingly secular. That is, it is increasingly disinterested in anything having to do with God or religion or with God's revealed truth in Scripture. The attitude of the world is, "I don't really need that. I'm happy with my life as it is. I am complete without that."

But we are not complete without that. We need a message and a set of words from the God who created us. Jesus said, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Deuteronomy 32:47 says, "These are not just idle words for you—they are your very life." And it is vitally important that we understand the nature and character of revealed Scripture. That's why we're coming to 2 Timothy 3:16 today. In my opinion, this is the most comprehensive verse in the Bible on the subject of the inspiration of Scripture.

Review and Introduction

First, just a word of review and introduction. Here at , we're in a year-long project to memorize 100 Bible verses, and during the course of 2009 I am preaching from these 100 verses. The first four verses are what I consider to be the foundational texts of Scripture: Genesis 1:1, John 1:1, John 1:14, and John 3:16. We looked at those and learned them. And then we moved on to the Roman's Road, as we call it—the four passages in the book of Romans that summarize for us how to be saved: Romans 3:23, 6:23, 5:8, and 10:9-10.

Now, with those essentials out of the way, we're coming to the general subject of Scripture and prayer—our communication prerogatives with Almighty God. He speaks to us in the Scripture, and we speak to Him in prayer. So the next series of verses has to do with the nature of Scripture and the opportunities we have in prayer.

The first verse in this series is 2 Timothy 3:16. The reference is easy to remember because you can associate it with John 3:16. John 3:16 is all about God giving us the Living Word (Jesus Christ), and 2 Timothy 3:16 is all about God's giving us the Written Word (the Holy Bible).

These two verses have more in common than the "street address" of 3:16:

- John 3:16 talks about the Savior, and 2 Timothy 3:16 talks about the Scriptures. These two entities comprise the two greatest gifts ever bestowed on humanity.
- Both are called "The Word"
- One is the Living Word, and the other is the Written Word.
- Both are utterly unique. Jesus is like no other person the world has ever seen, and the Bible is like no other book the world has ever read.
- Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. He came down from heaven, yet made His appearance through the instrumentality of a human being who was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures are both fully human and fully divine. They came down from heaven, yet were given through the instrumentality of human beings who were borne along by the Holy Spirit.
- Just as the Savior has a dual nature; the Scriptures have a dual nature.
- The Savior is the God-Man, and the Scriptures are from both God and man.
- The Savior came to save us, and the Scriptures were given to tell us how to be saved.
- The Bible is Jesus in print, and Jesus is the personification and fulfillment of the Scriptures.
- Just as the Savior was without sin, the Scriptures are without error.
- And so these 3:16s are twin verses about the Savior and the Scriptures.

Here in chapter 3, the apostle Paul warned Timothy that the Last Days will be extremely secular in nature. But in verse 14, he said: But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. And then, within that context, he gave us the Bible's premier text on the inspiration of Scripture, 2 Timothy 3:16: All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness

1. The Bible is F-Y-I from Heaven (v. 16a)

There are two parts of this verse. The first part tells us that the Bible is God's FYI to the human race. It is given by God For Our Information, and every word is inspired. All Scripture is God-breathed. Notice the key terms: All Scripture is God-breathed. Let's begin with the word Scripture. The term that Paul used in the Greek is the word γραφή (graph-A). We get our English word "graphite" from this, which is the substance in pencils. It means, literally, "something that is written down." When you see this word in the Bible, Scriptures, it always refers to the holy writings that make up the Bible.

Now there is something very important to understand about this graph-a. It is inspired. All Scripture is God-breathed. Now, the older translations said, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God." That is a more archaic way of saying the same thing. The word "inspire" has, as its stem word, the term "spire," which comes from the word "spirit" and conveys the idea of breathing. You might be familiar with the word "respire" and "expire." If someone expires, they stop breathing. We talk about the respiratory system—the re-spire-a-tory system, having to do with our breathing. And so the early English translators used the word "in-spire-a-tion," but the newer translators simply say "breathed out," or "God breathed."

The actual Greek word that Paul used is the compound word θεόπνευστος — Theópneustos. This is the only time this word appears in the Bible. The first term in this compound word is theos, which means God, as we saw during our series of sermons on the Trinity. And the second term is pneuma, which means spirit or breath. If you have pneumonia, you're having trouble breathing. So the word literally means God-breathed, or breathed out by God.

This is simply talking about talking. When we speak, we breathe out the words. Talking is simply breathing out loud and forming our breath into various sounds and syllables that we recognize as words. So the Bible is the words that God Himself breathed out, that He spoke. This book, the Bible, is composed of words that have been breathed out or spoken or given by God Himself.

Now, notice the adjective, "All." That means that every single word in the original texts has been breathed out by God. All Scriptures is given by inspiration of God. That is the essential nature and character of Scripture.

Now, you may ask, how did that happen? There is a parallel passage that explains this more fully. We can say that there are two major passages in the Bible that explain to us the doctrine of the inspiration of Scriptures. There are hundreds (really thousands) of

passages that refer to this, but there are two passages that are very precise doctrinal summarizations or explanations of the doctrine of inspiration. The first passage is the one we're looking at this morning from 2 Timothy, but the second one was written by Peter in 2 Peter 1:20-21:

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy (or part or portion) of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation....

The term *πίλυσις* – or, *epi'-lu-sis*, is used here, and the key word is the Greek word *luo*, which means to loose. *Epilusi* means to unloose a thing. In this case, Peter might perhaps meant to unloose its meaning, and, if so, the translation would be interpretation. The meaning of Scripture does not depend on any person's particular point of view or point of interpretation. But in this case, it seems that the word *epilusi* means to unloose it at the point of origin. This seems to be what Peter had in mind here. No Scripture comes simply from a prophet himself. No prophecy came about just because some man or woman was unilaterally unloosing or composing it. Its origin was higher.

For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Notice the term "carried along." In Acts 27, this same word is used of the ship that Paul was on. The winds filled the sails and the ship was carried along. The writers of the Bible were borne along by the wind or breathe of the Holy Spirit, and so the words they wrote were the very words of God.

So let me give you a basic working definition of Inspiration. It is that process whereby the writers of the Bible were carried along by the Holy Spirit so that the words they wrote were not their words only, but the very words of God Himself.

One theological dictionary put it this way: "Inspiration has been defined as that direct influence of God on the writers of the Bible by which, while they did not cease to be themselves, they were so moved, guarded, and guided by the Holy Spirit that their resulting productions constitute the written Word of God." (H. D. McDonald in Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), article on "Inspiration," vol. 1, p. 308.)

Another put it this way: "Inspiration may be defined as the Holy Spirit's superintending over the writers so that while writing according to their own styles and personalities, the result was God's Word written—authoritative, trustworthy, and free from error in the original autographs (manuscripts). (Enns, P. P. (1997, c1989). The Moody Handbook of Theology (160). Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press.)

That's why we say that the Bible is infallible and inerrant; it is fully trustworthy. It is God's FYI for the human race.

2. The Bible is G-P-S for Earth (v. 16b)

Now that brings us to the last half of the verse. Because the Bible gives us words from God, the Bible also gives us directions for life. It is our GPS for life on earth. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

Last year I spoke at a function in Jackson, Mississippi, and I met a man with whom I have become good friends. Several months ago, he called wanting to give me a GPS device. I was embarrassed to accept a gift like that, so I turned it down. The next week, I had to go to Atlanta for a wedding, and my motel was some distance from the site of the wedding, and the wedding was some distance from the site of the rehearsal dinner, and it was all a long way from the reception. It was all spread out in a part of Atlanta that I wasn't familiar with, and I got as lost as the children of Israel in the desert. I became so frustrated that I sent him an e-mail from my motel and said, "I think I'd like that GPS after all." He sent it right up, and I've been amazed at how that little device can determine exactly where I am, and then reach up to heaven and bring down the directions that I need from mile to mile along the way.

That's what the Bible does. First of all, as we saw in verse 15, it's able to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, it contains and conveys the message of redemption. And then, as we receive that message and are saved, it teaches us, and it rebukes us, and it corrects us, and it trains us in right living. It thoroughly equips us for whatever God wants us to do. This is why we read it every day. This is why we memorize it. This is why we study it constantly. This is why we love every page of it from Genesis to Revelation. Do you read the Bible every day? Do you study it diligently? Do you meditate on it constantly?

Dr. Paul Tournier wrote, "The Bible... is a book in which [a person] may learn from his Creator the art of healthy living." (Dr. Paul Tournier in A Doctor's Casebook [quoted in S. I. McMillen & David E. Stern: None of These Diseases (updated edition), p. 178.]

That's why, as someone once put it, "A Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't."

Conclusion: The Only Book

It's really the only Book we need, the only one we cannot do without. Several years ago, when I was working on a volume called *The Preacher's Sourcebook*, I asked for an interview with a noted pastor from Grand Rapids, Michigan, named Ed Dobson. Dr. Dobson is a highly respected leader and pastor, but he contracted a terrible and fatal disease, something like Lou Gehrig's disease, and he has to resign his pastorate and he was told that he would suffer increasing paralysis and perhaps not have very long to live. Well, I learned that he was in Nashville for a few days for one reason or another, and I called and arranged to meet him in a coffee shop downtown. When I walked in, there he was. He had little table all to himself, and spread about before him were his Bible, his Greek New Testament, and a legal pad. He was just pouring into the Scriptures. We had a wonderful interview but, to be honest, I remember very little of what he said. I have the notes of it and we transcribed it for the *Sourcebook*. But just from memory right now, I can recall little of what he said to me. But I clearly remember finding him sitting there with his Bible, his Greek New Testament, and his legal pad, just pouring over the book that he has been studying all his life.

This is the only Book with a capital "B." It's the only Book we cannot do without. I have many books in my personal library, and I have a hard time parting with any of them. Last year, someone asked me to donate some books from my library to an auction, and I worked and worked on finding a book with which I could part, and I never did come up with one. I'm a book-lover. But yet I can say without hesitation—I'd gladly give up all my other books for the Bible. If I could only have one book in my possession, there is no question as to that Book.

Henry Stanley was the famous explorer who discovered David Livingstone in the jungle and uttered those famous words, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume." He really did say that. Well later Stanley himself became a missionary to the interior of Africa. He was a scholar and a learned man, and he started across the continent of Africa with seventy-three books in three packs, weighing 180 pounds. After he had gone three hundred miles, he was obliged to throw away some of his books, through the fatigue of those carrying his baggage. As he continued on his journey, his library grew less and less, until he had but one book left. But it was the only book he needed. (Tan, P. L. (1996, c1979). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations : A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations*. Electronic edition.)

Alexander Duff, the first foreign missionary of the Church of Scotland, left with his wife and library for India. But before they landed on the coast of India, the ship stuck something and split apart. It was ten o'clock at night, and throughout that long night the passengers huddled in terror expecting to be carried to the depths. They were saved the next day, but Duff's entire library of eight hundred volumes was lost at sea.

Later, standing on the shore and looking sadly toward the reef, Duff saw a small package bobbing atop the water. He watched and waited as it floated close enough for him to wade out and retrieve. It was his Bible. Of all his precious books, it alone survived. His heart soared, for he took it as a sign from the Lord that this one book alone was worth more than all the others put together.

He assembled his fellow survivors and read Psalm 107, the *Traveler's Psalm*. Soon, using the same Bible, he began his first class with a little group of five boys under a banyan tree. Within a week the class had grown to three hundred, and it soon became a school that evangelized and educated the higher classes in India, producing a qualified generation of leaders for the nation's young church. (Morgan, R. J. (2000). *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes* (electronic ed.) (53). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.)

My father bought me a little New Testament from a traveling evangelist when I was very young, and then, when I was a little older, he bought me a study Bible. I can recall very few days in my life when I haven't read God's Word. I love it cover to cover, don't you?

When I read the book of Genesis, I understand the beginning of the universe and I discover my roots and the roots of all my relationships. When I read Exodus, I begin to understand the wonder of redemption. When I read the books of the Law, I begin to see what God is like in His moral character and in what He expects of us in our moral and ethical behavior. When I read Joshua and Judges and the historical books of the Old Testament, I learn how, in the providence of God, a nation was being prepared to give the world a Savior and how the Most High rules in the affairs of man. When I read the book of Job, I know how to respond to sorrow. When I read the book of Psalms, I learn how to worship. When I read the book of Proverbs, I know how to control my tongue and my temper. When I read Isaiah, I see a Suffering Savior who tells me how to mount up with wings as eagles, how to walk and not grow weary and how to run and not be faint. When I come to the Gospels, I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus

the Nazarene, and I ask in wonderment, “What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the waves obey Him?” When I stand at the foot Mount Calvary I see One hanging there upon a tree. But then I turn the page and I’m there in the Garden at the very moment when the Savior of the world rises from the dead and bursts from the tomb, saying, “Because I live, you will live also.” Coming to the book of Acts, I’m caught up in the adventure of taking the Good News of Christ to the uttermost part of the world, and I find passion and purpose for life. I proceed onto Romans and learn what it means to be justified by grace through faith alone, and on to Ephesians where I study a catalog of my riches in Christ, and on to Philippians where I can rejoice in the Lord always. The letters of John give me a new commandment but it’s still the old one—to love one another. Brother Jude tells me to contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. And then I come at last to the book of Revelation, and I have a panorama of the future and a sure and earnest hope for a trip I’m soon taking and a city I’m soon to inhabit, even as John said, “I see a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” I come to the last promise of the Bible and hear Him say, “I am coming quickly,” and to the last prayer of the Bible, and I pray, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus.” And this book is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our pathway.

It’s our F-Y-I from Heaven,
and it’s our G-P-S for earth.
It’s the B-I-B-L-E. Yes, that’s the book for me!

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

2 Timothy 4:9-22

I NEED HELP WITH MY LONELINESS

Today I would like to speak on the subject: “I Need Help with My Loneliness.” Some years ago, I received a letter from one of our singles that included these words: “I’m more or less content alone, I suppose. I’ve had so many adventures in my life already; I’m used to doing them alone. But there’s this sense of lacking. It fades in and out. It’s always waiting in the background for a weak moment. I’ve prayed many times for someone to share these adventures with, but the Lord’s time hasn’t come yet.”

This week I read this letter in the newspaper, written to an advice columnist: “I am a 14-year-old girl who finds it hard to make friends. It’s probably because I’m shy and quiet. Sometimes I get so lonely that I’ve even thought of ending my life. Whenever I see a group of teenagers hanging out together and having a good time, I feel uncomfortable and jealous. Though I do have a few close friends in school, in church, I am treated as if I’m not there. I cannot stand the loneliness anymore. It’s simply too hard to bear. I don’t think I can tell my friends about this because in front of them, I act like a fun-loving and funny girl. I also cannot tell my parents because I don’t want them to worry. So I confide in my hamster, but in the end, it’s still just my pet.” [1]

Loneliness is at epidemic proportions in our world today, and it is a serious issue of mental and physical health. Morris Smith in his book, *The Devil’s Advocate*, wrote: “It comes to all of us sooner or later. Friends die, family dies, lovers and husbands, too. We get old; we get sick... In a society where people live in impersonal cities or suburbs, where electronic entertainment often replaces one-to-one conversation, where people move from job to job, and state to state, and marriage to marriage, loneliness has become an epidemic.”[2]

Well, let me give you four categories of lonely people. First, singles struggle with loneliness. Second, people in ministry. Third, those whose friends forsake them. Fourth, prisoners on death row.

Now, let me ask you a question. How would you like to be a person who fits into all four of those categories at once. Have you ever known a single who was in ministry whose friends had forsaken him and who found himself in prison on death row? Can you imagine the multiplied layers of loneliness that person would feel?

That is exactly the description of the apostle Paul as he wrote his final extant letter, 2 Timothy. And in his last paragraph, we have some fascinating insights about how the old apostle was dealing with his own mental health.

Be diligent to come to me quickly; for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry. And Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come—and the books, especially

the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works. You must also beware of him, for he has greatly resisted our words. At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it now be charged against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus stayed in Corinth, but Trophimus I have left in Miletus sick. Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus greets you, as well as Pudens, Linus, Claudia, and all the brethren. The Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Grace be to you. Amen.

As far as we can tell, these are the final written words of the apostle Paul. They were probably written from the dungeon of a prison in Rome, sometime in or near A.D. 67. Not long afterward, according to our best traditions, Paul was beheaded.

I'm sure that as he sat in that cold, dark, filthy subterranean dungeon, the apostle Paul battled loneliness, and it's important for us to realize that having feelings of loneliness isn't a sin. It may be a sin when we cave into them and allow ourselves to sink into depression and self-pity. But feeling alone is normal and natural and unavoidable. Sometimes when I've been traveling overseas by myself, I struggle with this. During the day, I'm busy. I'm sightseeing. I'm reading tour books or studying in museums or meeting people for one reason or another. But then I return to my hotel room and it's very empty and there's no one to share any of it with. And being isolated in a foreign culture, alone when you go to bed and when you get up, can be intensely lonely.

As I studied these verses from the perspective of loneliness, I came away with an eight-fold strategy that can help any one of us to cope with feelings of loneliness.

1. Keep Your Lord Near

First, keep your Lord near. The verse that strikes me with greatest force in this passage is verse 17: But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me. Notice that verb—He stood with me. Now to really understand this, we have to read the preceding verse, too: “At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me.”

When Paul says, “At my first defense,” he is evidently referring to a preliminary hearing leading up to the present trial. Paul had been arrested and charged with preaching the Gospel and evangelizing the empire. He was on trial for his life. When he stood to face the charges, every single friend he had in Rome fled in fear. Not a single friend stood with him. After all, Paul was a Roman citizen, and he was exempt from certain terrible things like flogging and crucifixion and being thrown to the lions. But most of his friends in Rome were not citizens of the Empire, and to have gone before the Emperor in Paul's defense was to risk flogging and crucifixion and being thrown to the lions. Paul understood that, and so he added, “May it not be charged against them.” Nevertheless, not one of them stood with Paul. But the Lord stood with him.

By saying, “The Lord stood with me,” it almost seems to me that Paul looked over to his right side and saw—not with his physical vision, but with the eyes of faith—the Lord Jesus Christ standing beside him. He didn't just say, “The Lord was with me,” or “The Lord was near me.” He said, “When I stood up to face the charges that were being leveled against me, my Lord stood up beside me.” He seemed to be visualizing the very presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I was a boy there was a well-known evangelist holding crusades around the country. His name was Oral Roberts, and he was a faith healer. Up in the mountains, we were skeptical about the faith-healing part of his ministry, but somehow or other I came across some little booklets that he wrote. He had a little booklet on the subject of prayer, and I have kept that booklet all these years. He said something I've never forgotten:

Talk to God as a person. Do not think of God only as a great Spirit that fills the universe, although you know He is that Spirit. Do not think of Him as being millions of miles away, although you know he is everywhere at the same time. Think of Him as a person—God focused into a human being whose name is Jesus Christ.

One of the reasons God sent His Son to the earth was that people had only a vague idea of God. It is difficult for the human mind to comprehend or to conceive a totally intangible and spiritual God. If you think of Him only in terms of the spiritual and the intangible; if you think of Him as some great spiritual being beyond the stars, it is hard for you to focus your mind on God as He is. That is why God sent His Son. That is why Jesus said, “He that hath seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Christ is the brightness of God's glory and the express image of His personality.

To think of Christ as a person makes it easy for you to see Him in your mind's eye. You see Him beside the waters of the Sea of Galilee. You see Him standing on the hillside, preaching to the people. You see Him laying His hands on the sick. You see Him blessing little children. You see Him on the cross. You see Him raising the dead. You see Him ascending to heaven. And you see Him sitting at God's right hand. You can see the Lord in your mind's eye. And so, when you pray, pray to God as a person.[3]

My mother discovered this secret in the closing years of her life. She was very lonely after my father's death. She lived alone in a rambling cabin in the mountains. But one day, her attitude seemed to change and to improve. She told me that she had just learned to practice the presence of the Lord Jesus all day long, when she rose, when she read her Bible and had her coffee, when she did her errands, when she cleaned her house, when she had her supper alone, when she went to bed and turned off the light. He was there with her all the time.

Now, if you are a cynical, secular psychologist, you'd say, "Well, people like that are just creating a mental illusion. It's like a child who invents an imaginary friend."

But we have biblical warrant for this. From one end of the Bible to the other we are given divine reassurance that this is not imaginary, but it is reality.

- Ø Adam and Eve heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the Garden of Eden, coming to talk with them and to fellowship with them (Genesis 3:8).
- Ø Moses spoke with God face to face, as a man speaks with his friend (Exodus 33:11).
- Ø The Lord said to Joshua, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:8).
- Ø Psalm 16 says: "In Your presence is fullness of joy, and at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."
- Ø The Psalmist said, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me (Psalm 23).
- Ø Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).
- Ø Paul said, "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but pray about everything" (Philippians 4).
- Ø James said, "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you."

So when we have asked Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Savior, we can learn to practice His presence, and it takes the hard edge off the temptations of loneliness. It seemed to make all the difference here in 2 Timothy 4 as we read of Paul's last days, and it can be the same for us.

2. Keep Your Friends Close

Second, keep your friends close. Now here's a remarkable thing. In the passage that I just read, Paul's last recorded words on this earth, his last will and testament, he took the time to list the individual names of eighteen different people—Timothy himself would make it nineteen—most of them his friends.

As I read this, I thought of this question: If I had come to the end of my life, and I was writing my final words, and I came to my final paragraph, what would I write about? I might write about my accomplishments or failures. I might have written about how wonderful the Lord has been to me all my life. But would I have used up that pen and ink, that scrap of parchment, listing nearly 20 names of particular friends about whom I was interested?

Just look at it: Demas, Crescens, Titus, Luke, Mark, Tychicus, Carpus, Prisca, Aquila, Onesiphorus, Erastus, Trophimus, Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia and all the brethren....

Paul was wrapped up in keeping his friends close, in caring for their needs. He didn't have a lot of time to worry about himself; he was too busy caring for the needs of other people. He was the personification of the very advice he had given earlier in Philippians 2:4: Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

I don't think that loneliness is a sin, but I think that self-pity is; and the best way to get over a bad bout of feeling sorry for yourself is to shift your focus to the needs of others and learn to be a servant.

That's another thing I noticed about my mother during her latter years. She spent time every day doing things for others. She had a fabulous recipe for homemade rolls, and she baked dozens of them to take to church each week to feed the sick and shut-ins. She kept a little flower garden so that she could take arrangements to people in the nursing home. She regularly invited people to her home for supper or for one of her famous mountain breakfasts. She'd drive along the winding roads of Buck Mountain to visit her ailing sister and to bring her some cheer.

When was the last time you or I did any of those things? We're so busy nowadays that we don't have time to commit random acts of kindness, but that's also one of the reasons we're lonely.

Samuel Johnson used to say, "Keep your friendships in good repair."

3. Keep Your Correspondence Going

Closely connected to that is my third observation: keep your correspondence going. Theologians classify Paul's letters into various categories. We call this letter, 2 Timothy, for example, one of his three Pastoral Epistles because it was written to Timothy about pastoral matters. But it could also be classified as one of his Prison Epistles. Paul wrote several of his letters while in prison. It was helpful for those to whom he was writing, of course. After all, just think of how enriched we are to have 2 Timothy, and such books as Ephesians and Colossians and Philippians! But the act of writing these letters was also therapeutic for Paul himself. It gave him a valuable outlet, a work to do, a sense of purpose. Even when he was trapped in a place of loneliness such as a prison cell, he could still pick up his pen and minister to others.

And I want to suggest to you that writing is a powerful antidote to loneliness. I find when I'm lonely and away from home that writing in my journal is a matter of necessity. Now, almost no one has ever read any pages in my journals. I almost never show them to anyone. But when I write, I'm writing before the Lord and communing with my own spirit. I'm vaguely aware that it's possible a hundred years from now that my great, great grandchildren might read them if the pages survive the passing of the years. But there's something therapeutic about keeping a journal.

But even better is writing to others. Whether it's an electronic letter sent around the world in a flash of time, or an old-fashioned card sent through the mail to a friend, it's a wonderful way to minister.

4. Keep Your Mind Occupied

Fourth, keep your mind occupied. Look at what Paul asked Timothy in verse 13 of our text: "Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come—and the books, especially the parchments." We don't know the contents of these books and parchments. Were they copies of the Old Testament Scriptures? Were they commentaries? Did this represent his personal library? We just don't know; but we do know that up to the very end, the Apostle Paul kept his mind active. He was a student. He was a reader. He poured over the Scriptures. He never cultivated a lazy mind.

Loneliness and boredom are closely related. When we keep our lives busy and our minds active, we don't have as much time to feel lonely. Of course, there are two times during the day when we're more tempted to feel lonely than any other. The first is at mealtime. There's something about eating alone that exacerbates feelings of loneliness. Recently I was in a restaurant at supertime, and as I looked around I saw several people eating alone in booths and tables. Every single one of them was talking on their cell phone all the time they were eating. When I'm at home and Katrina is away for some reason or another, I usually turn on the television and watch the news while I'm eating. Meal times are lonely times when you're alone.

But the other time is in the evenings. And for those of you who feel lonely in the evenings, I want to suggest the books and the parchments.

I'm very fortunate because for some reason I learned to read myself to sleep every single night of my life. I don't remember a time in childhood when I wasn't reading in bed. My father bought me a little New Testament, and I read a few verses every night before bed; and we had a card to the public library, and every week I'd come home with an armful of books, most of which I read in bed. Now after all these years, I still do the same thing. It's been a lifelong habit. Katrina and I have a television in our bedroom, but I don't think that we've ever watched it at bedtime. We both much prefer the books and the parchments.

Right now, I'm reading two books. One is an old book by Lorne Sanny on the subject of evangelism and soul-winning. I always have a devotional or Christian book from which to read a few pages, because it helps settle and soothe my mind. My other current reading project is Dostoevsky's famous Russian novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, which I've finally decided to tackle after all these years.

When I'm away from home in a hotel or motel, I seldom turn on the television. It depresses me. Instead, I have my books in my suitcase, and I study at the little desk then read in bed—and keeping my mind occupied in a healthy way like that minimizes the feelings of loneliness that I might face.

Furthermore, spending just a few minutes every day in a healthy mental occupation can enrich your life more than you realize. Do you know that there is a popular book out now entitled *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*. The author is a clinical psychologist who co-founded the Harvard Writing Center, and her thesis is that it's remarkable what you can learn and accomplish over time even if you only have fifteen minutes a day to devote to it.

Do you want to master the contents of the book of Revelation? Do you want to memorize Psalm 46? Do you want to read through the Bible? Do you want to study some of the great classics of Christian literature? Learn to turn off the television set and set aside an hour or so before bedtime in keeping your mind occupied with good things. Paul said, "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praise-worthy—meditate on these things."

Over the years, many people have told me that in a time of bereavement or stress or loneliness, they have learned the secret to the evening quiet time in which they leisurely end the day with prayer and good old-fashioned Bible study. Doing that not only occupies the mind, but it fills the soul with the sense of God's presence that we talked about earlier. When you turn off the light and lay your head on the pillow, your mind and heart are filled with Scripture and with the promises of God.

There's no pillow like a promise. No blanket like the Bible. No mattress like meditation.

5. Keep Your Life Productive

Fifth, keep your life productive. Paul was at a point in his career when he could have easily said, "Well, I'm going to phase out of ministry. I'm going to devote the rest of my time to working on my legal defense and trying to stay alive as long as possible." But look at the number of personal ministries he was sustaining in his last days.

The book of 2 Timothy is filled with Paul's insights into ministry, and even in this last paragraph we're reading the directives and instructions of a productive man:

- Ø He was concerned about the spiritual collapse of his friend, Demas.
- Ø He had sent co-workers to various churches as trouble-shooters and teachers.
- Ø He was sending Timothy a replacement so that Timothy could join him in Rome.
- Ø He wanted to warn his friends about the duplicity of Alexander the coppersmith
- Ø He was concerned that "the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear" (v. 17).
- Ø He wanted to keep up-to-date with the ministries of Priscilla and Aquila and other friends.
- Ø He sent personal regards and greetings to his co-workers in the kingdom.

Paul was a man whose life was productive to the very end. I remember when my friend, Dr. Billy Melvin, retired after many years as Executive Director of the National Association of Evangelicals. Katrina and I attended a banquet honoring him for his years of service, and one of the speakers said something I've never forgotten. He said, "Retirement is just God's way of freeing you up for further service."

Dr. Bill Bright recently wrote his last book, *The Journey Home*. It was written as he was dying. He said something in that book that I had never thought about before. In the Old Testament, the prophet Samuel served the nation of Israel for many years as a priest and as a judge. Then his sons and eventually King Saul took over, and Samuel retired, as it were. But 1 Samuel 8 does not say, "When Samuel retired..." but it says, "When Samuel was old..." And what did he do when he was old? He told the children of Israel, "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way" (1 Samuel 12:23, NLT).

Retirement was God's way of freeing Samuel up to a broader ministry of prayer and teaching. He was productive to the very end.

Recently I read Robert Fulghum's book, *Words I Wish I Wrote*, in which he quotes these words by the Japanese artist Hokusai:

Ever since the age of six I have had a mania for drawing the forms of objects. Toward the age of fifty I published a very large number of drawings, but I am dissatisfied with everything which I produced before the age of seventy. It was at the age of seventy-three I nearly mastered the real nature and form of birds, fish, plants, etcetera. Consequently, at the age of eighty, I have got to the bottom of things; at one hundred I shall have attained a decidedly higher level which I cannot define, and at the age of one hundred and ten every dot and every line from my brush will be alive. I call on those who may live as long as I to see if I keep my word.

Well, the Japanese artist Hokusai didn't make it to 110, but he was still painting at the time of his death at age 90, and he was still

convinced that his best work was ahead of him.[4]

What am I saying? Paul didn't have time to sink into the quicksand of depression or self-pity, and he didn't have time to harbor intense feelings of loneliness. He was too busy working for the Savior. He was about His Master's business.

6. Keep Your Heart Healthy

Sixth, if we're going to stave off unhealthy feelings of depression and self-pity related to loneliness, we've got to keep our hearts healthy. Some time ago I was on the airplane seated beside a world-famous cardiologist. He was returning from a medical convention overseas. He wanted to talk to me about the importance of keeping my heart healthy. He said that the heart is a muscle, and it must be exercised on a regular basis. The way we exercise it is to make it beat faster for a period of time through intense exercise. If we don't do that, we'll succumb sooner or later to heart disease, he said.

Well, we have another kind of heart, and we must exercise it and keep it healthy. One of the things that surprises me in this paragraph is the total lack of bitterness that Paul feels as he faces certain levels of betrayal and disappointment from others. Look at verses 9-10: Be diligent to come to me quickly; for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world. Paul is no doubt grieved over this, but he states it as a matter of fact. "Timothy, I need you to come as quickly as possible. I was relying on Demas to help me complete some of these projects, but he's bailed out."

Paul is honest about this. He was no doubt disappointed and grieved. But he did not take it personally.

Then look at verse 11: Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.

Mark is the young man who had so badly disappointed Paul a few years earlier on his first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas had taken Mark with them on their trip, but on that occasion it was Mark who had forsaken them, having loved the present world. But Mark had changed. He had grown. He had become a giant for the Lord. And in writing these words, Paul was telling all of Christian history that he had been too premature in his earlier criticism of Mark. He had been wrong to write off this young man. Now he commended Mark and needed him for the ministry.

Then look at verse 14: Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works. You also must beware him, for he has greatly resisted our words.

Paul had been badly damaged by this man. He had been abused and harmed by him. But there is not a hint of anger or bitterness here. He just turned Alexander over to the Lord. He was saying, "Here is man of whom I could be very angry and resentful, but the best thing is to turn him over to the Lord. I'm not going to allow myself to simmer about it or to hate him or to grow bitter over it."

And then look at verse 16: At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them. I'm sure that the Christians in Rome would have wished to stand with Paul, but to do so was highly dangerous. Would you have come to church today if you knew that you might be seized and tortured just for showing up? If you knew that you might be fired from your job, torn from your family, and tossed into prison for taking a stand for Christ? Paul had never felt so alone, but he tried to be understanding and forgiving. And furthermore, he asked the Lord to forgive them for deserting him.

He didn't take things personally. I think that very often our biggest problems in life are that we take things personally. How easy it is for us to feel personally affronted, personally betrayed, personally offended. Paul shed those things like water on a rain slicker, and he kept his heart healthy.

When you give into bitterness or anger, it opens the door for self-pity and loneliness. The best thing is to exercise our hearts with the love and grace of Jesus Christ and to remain healthy of soul.

7. Keep Your Hopes High

Seventh, Paul kept his hopes high. I think one of the most remarkable verses the apostle ever wrote is verse 18: But the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom.

Paul was saying, "I am on death row. I am in the worst spot I've ever been in. But God is going to spring me from this prison. He is going to deliver me. He is going to preserve me."

And shortly after that, he was led from his cell, his neck was stretched over a block of wood, and a Roman ax decapitated him.

That's how God sprang him from his prison cell. That's how God delivered him. That's how God preserved him. For to Paul, to live was Christ and to die was gain.

Both in life and in death, he cultivated a positive attitude. Now it is never too late to do that. Norman Vincent Peale was an American clergyman who wrote a famous book in the middle of the twentieth century entitled, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Some of his theology is a little weak, but I've found his book very helpful. So have a lot of other people. One day, Dr. Peale received a letter from a man thanking him for his book. The man was 93 years old. He said, "I have had an inferiority complex for 93 years, and it made me miserable for 93 years. But a friend gave me your book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. I read this book; I believed it; I practiced all your suggestions. And I'm writing to report that after 93 years I have lost my inferiority complex."^[5]

Well, that was surely the longest inferiority complex in history. But it's never too late to change, to grow, to improve. And we need to stay in the Scriptures, study what the Bible says about death and heaven and the future, and keep our spirits high.

8. Keep Your Worship Focused

Finally, Paul overcame his temptations toward loneliness by keeping his worship focused. There is one wonderful little sentence in this passage that we're apt to pass over if we don't read it slowly and carefully: "To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!" (v. 18). Paul was concerned every day that God be glorified. Whether alone or in a crowd, whether in poverty or wealth, whether in prison or in paradise, he lived for the glory of God. His very life was a doxology—an act of worship.

Worship is a tremendous antidote to loneliness. Recently, I received a sweet letter from a woman in Indiana, and I'd like to share it with you.

Dear Pastor Morgan, I am 72-years old, recently widowed, and in September, my youngest daughter surprised me with a copy of your book, *Then Sings My Soul*, and I can't begin to express what a blessing it has been! My husband was a church organist for over forty years, and music has been such a vital part of our lives. As you might guess, these old songs have been such a blessing through the years. And thank God, they still are every time I hear them or even read the words. I've had many long, lonely hours since my husband's homegoing to heaven, but I have sat down with this book and read the words and stories and have rejoiced over and over again at their meaning! One of my very favorites has always been "How Firm a Foundation." I have it quite marked and highlighted, but along with many others.

You're never alone if you have an open hymnbook on the table in front of you. As you worship the Lord, you're joining an ageless choir made up of all the saints of all the ages, with the angels as the back-up singers, and you're praising the Lord who has given us a firm foundation for life.

So we must recognize loneliness as an ever-present shadow in our lives, especially in this disconnected age. But it's a shadow that increasingly fades as we walk in the light. As the old song says:

Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows come,
Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heaven and home,
When Jesus is my portion? My constant friend is He:
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

2 Timothy 4:6-22

AGING GRACEFULLY: YOUNG AT HEART

Isaiah 46:3-4; 2 Timothy

Even to your old age and gray hairs
I am he, I am he who will sustain you.
I have made you and I will carry you;
I will sustain you and I will rescue you (Isaiah 46:3-4)

Mischa Elman, the Russian-born American violinist, began performing when very young and continued into old age. Someone asked

him if he could tell any difference in audience reaction through the years. "Not really," he replied. "When I was a boy, audiences would exclaim, 'Imagine playing the violin like that at his age!' Now, they're beginning to say the same thing again!"

I once read about a ninety-year-old man who decided to travel around the world. His buddy came to him in distress, saying, "You shouldn't try a trip like this. I might not see you again."

The departing gentleman replied, "Maybe not. You may be dead when I get back!"

I love those kinds of stories because they express the attitude I want as I grow older, like the old song that says...

Fairy tales can come true, it can happen to you

If you're young at heart...

But unless our positive thinking is reinforced by biblical promises, it's as hollow as an empty shell. Blind optimism doesn't make for golden years unless you're talking about fool's gold. Cheerfulness without truthfulness is craziness. Rose-colored glasses only give you eye strain, and none of us needs to live in the same house as Pollyanna.

The only thing that really counts is this: What does the Bible say about growing older? Today I'd like to show you two passages about aging, one in the Old Testament and the other in the New. The first is Isaiah 46.

Isaiah 46

The last section of Isaiah is unlike anything else in the Bible, for God gives Isaiah a series of messages for people four generations into the future. Isaiah lived during the days of the Assyrian Empire, but the last portion of his book is written for Jewish believers in the Babylonian Empire, comforting them in the distresses of their exile.

In chapter 46, Isaiah contrasts the gods of Babylon with the Jehovah of Israel.

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low;
their idols are born by beasts of burden.

The images that are carried about are burdensome,
a burden for the weary.

They stoop and bow down together;
unable to rescue the burden,
they themselves go off into captivity (vss 1-2).

Bel and Nebo were Babylonian idols, and here Isaiah pictures them being carried out of Babylon as plunder on the backs of donkeys. He says, "See these Babylonian idols? They're nothing but debris being hauled away in sacks on the backs of donkeys. They aren't a blessing to anyone. They're nothing but a burden to the poor donkeys that carry them away."

"But," Isaiah continues, "let me tell you about the God who truly dispenses blessings:"

Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all you who remain of the house of Israel,
you whom I have upheld since you were conceived,
and have carried since your birth.

Even to your old age and gray hairs
I am he, I am he who will sustain you.
I have made you and I will carry you;
I will sustain you and I will rescue you (vss 3-4)

Though the Babylonian Empire looks brutal and invincible, sooner or later its gods will fail. But Jehovah will never fall and never fail, nor will his promises:

Even to your old age and gray hairs
I am he, I am he who will sustain you.
I have made you and I will carry you;
I will sustain you and I will rescue you (Isaiah 46:3-4)

This is a promise in three tenses. He begins with a double application of the present tense verb AM: "Even to your old age and gray hairs I AM he, I AM he..."

Whenever we see God saying "I AM..." we realize that he's saying something very powerful and profound. When Moses stood before the burning bush, he asked God, "What is your name? Who shall I say sent me?" The Lord replied, "I AM who I AM. Tell them I AM sent you."

God is the self-existent, self-dependant, self-sufficient one, the one who has always existed from eternity past and who will always exist in eternity future. The one with no beginning and no ending. The one who is and was and is to come. The one who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

What does that mean to us? That means that the ravages of time are rendered powerless in his hand, and that's why he begins comforting us here about aging.

He moves to the past: I have made you.

God reminds us that, though we may feel increasingly frail, he is the designer and creator of us -- body, mind, and soul. He's therefore able to care for us as we accumulate gray hairs.

And, in fact, that's what he proceeds to say: I am he. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

And he moves to the future with a three-fold application of the "I Will" formula.

These are all shepherding terms. As the shepherd leads his flock along the mountain heights and into the valleys, sometimes the ground is too rugged, the ditches too deep, the ravines too wide. The shepherd stoops down and wraps his arms beneath the belly of his sheep, carrying him.

The shepherd also provides for all the sheep's needs, leading him to pasture, giving him oats, taking him to still waters. Likewise, God will meet all our needs as long as we're in this world. He will sustain us as we age.

And when we're overwhelmed, he will rescue us. He may not immediately deliver us from every problem or pain, but in the final analysis, he will rescue us from every foe.

The encircling Father gives us an encouraging future.

This is a promise for a lifetime -- for those who know the good Shepherd.

2 Timothy

Now, we don't have to search through the Bible very long to find examples. Remember when Israel fought the Amalekites in Exodus 17? Joshua fought down in the valley while Moses, Aaron, and Hur stood atop the mountain lifting hands and hearts in prayer. J. Oswald Sanders said, "In the fluctuations of battle, the key to victory was not in the hands of Joshua and his army battling in the valley, but in those of Moses and Aaron and Hur -- all octogenarians -- on the mountaintop." Old people, you see, can pray with incredible power.

Or look at Caleb whose greatest exploits for the Lord came in his old age. And it was when Anna and Simeon were very old that they announced the birth of the Messiah in the temple in Jerusalem. The Apostle John gave us the book of Revelation in his ninth decade.

But the example I'd primarily like to show you today is the Apostle Paul. Paul referred to himself, in writing to his friend Philemon, as being old. He said, "I then, as Paul -- an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus..." (Philemon 9). And shortly afterward, he penned his final words, writing 2 Timothy. Paul was old through suffering, imprisoned and near his death. His last surviving words say:

I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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. Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas... When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments... At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 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. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. Go him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Paul was shackled, sick, suffering, and worn out. His health was bad, for he had an unpleasant illness -- a thorn in the flesh. He was facing death and deserted by his friends. Sick, suffering, deserted, broken in health, facing death, and alone.

In what sort of mood would you expect to find such a person?

Well, it depends.

It depends on whether or not that person knows the God of Isaiah 46:4.

Irrepressible

Paul's mood can be summarized in four words. First, he was irrepressible. He was sanguine and upbeat, like a man excited about a trip. He said, The time has come for my departure. I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.

As believers grow older they can increasingly say, "I'm closer to Heaven than I've ever been before!" That is not a bad thing! Malcomb Muggeridge wrote that he looked forward to death "like a prisoner awaiting release; like a school boy when the end of the term is near; like a migrant bird ready to fly south."

Hardworking

Second, he was hardworking. He was busy here, finishing one of the sixty-six greatest works of literature the world has ever seen -- 2 Timothy. And he wrote, "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry."

Paul didn't consider his work for the Lord over just because he was old and sick and suffering and about to die. He still had stuff to do -- more work than he could finish by himself, so he needed John Mark.

When I was a preschooler, my pastor was a peppery, irrepressible man named Harvey Hill. He later retired from full-time ministry in his sixties due to heart problems. He moved to Florida where he fell victim to diabetes, prostate cancer, and open-heart surgery.

But he determined that his work for the Lord wasn't over; so he became involved in a church, and you'll never guess what they asked him to do. He became the youth minister, working with teenagers! He's in his eighties now, and he told me, "Just last week I asked the Lord keep using me at least until I'm 90!"

Well, that was Paul. As some people age, they find themselves hard-drinking, hard-headed, hard-hearted, hard-nosed, hard-up, or hard-of-hearing. Paul was more concerned about being hard-working to his final breath.

Studious

Third, he was studious. He asked Timothy to bring his books and parchments. He reminds us of Pearl Buck, who said, "I have reached an honorable position in life because I am old and no longer young. I am a far more useful person than I was fifty years ago,

or forty years ago, or thirty, twenty, or even ten. I have learned so much since I was seventy."

Charitable

Finally, Paul was charitable, sporting a gentle and forgiving attitude. He wasn't going to carry resentments and anger with him into the sunset. Notice verse 14: Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. In other words, he was leaving his enemies in God's hands. And look at verse 16: At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.

So Paul, in old age, though sick, suffering, shackled, and facing death, was irrepressible, hardworking, studious, and charitable. How could he be that way? He tells us in verse 17: The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength. The risen Savior provides resilient strength. The encircling Father gives an encouraging future.

And that brings us right back to Isaiah 46:6 -- Even to your old age and gray hairs, I am he. I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you. I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

Or, put another way:

In every condition, in sickness and health
In poverty's vale, or abounding in wealth;
At home or abroad, on the land, on the sea,
As your days may demand shall your strength ever be.
Even down to old age, all my people shall prove
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;
And when whitened hairs shall their temples adore,
Like lambs they shall still in my bosom be borne.