

## Learned and Believed

### 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Have you thought about why you find it difficult to witness to your faith? You are not the first! Throughout the Epistle of 2 Timothy, the author repeatedly admonishes the minister to be wary of heresy and false teachers, and he directs Timothy to focus on the truth and to be compassionate in his teaching about faith. In this passage, the author expands upon these themes by addressing how to discern truthful doctrines, how to use sacred writings, how to recognize faithful teachers, and how to develop skills that will improve the communication of the gospel.

Timothy is urged to remember "what you have learned and firmly believed" by "knowing from whom you learned it" (3:14). Authority in matters of truth and doctrine does not come from charismatic speakers who might charm an audience, or from propositions that might ease our way of living; instead, authentic authority comes from the experience and insights of those who have lived their faith and shared it with the church. It is their instruction, their model of fidelity and insight (especially that of Paul), to which Timothy is urged to turn.

Not only is Timothy directed to remember and respect his teachers, he is also instructed to follow "the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:15). The writings certainly would include the Hebrew Scriptures that would have been a part of Timothy's religious nurture; and maybe the letters of Paul would have been considered sacred writings. It is also quite possible that the author would have known of the Gospels, or that Timothy, who represented a ministerial bridge between the Jewish and Greek worlds, might have considered some Greek works of wisdom as sacred writings. Even so, the important element in the author's directive about remembering what Timothy has "learned and firmly believed" is that he should know its source—from whom he had learned the teaching or in which writing it had appeared.

The letter's author distinguishes Scripture as inspired by God; having the imprimatur of God's presence in its substance. The authority of sacred writings is derived from their divine inspiration. But, the focus is on the use to which Scripture might be put. On Paul's assertions, the purpose of Scripture is instruction that emboldens our hope. The author of this Pastoral Epistle adds that "all scripture" is also "useful for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness".

Timothy was to distinguish himself from the false teachers who seek "to suit their own desires" and who appeal to "people [who] will not put up with sound doctrine" (4:3). He was to present the hard challenge of the truth that shapes the way to pursue new life in Christ. Timothy is to be a faithful teacher-minister, and follow the model of Paul as one who suffers (1:8; 2:9) for the sake of living out the gospel and sharing its truth.

Timothy is also urged to be consistent and persistent in proclaiming the gospel, regardless of "whether the time is favorable or unfavorable" (4:2). In so doing, he is instructed to exercise "the utmost patience in teaching," to build up the body of Christ and enable its members to manifest their many gifts. The gifts of the faithful teacher include patience, persistence, and consistency; gifts that must be cultivated in the soil of suffering, in the process of chaining one's desires for the sake of submitting fully to God's demands for ministry. The author summarizes the guidance to Timothy as a teacher-preacher with the mandate to "always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully" (4:5). **Joseph L. Price**

Like a warning message in small print on the back of a cleaning solution bottle, these verses from the Pastoral Epistle are last-minute instructions for Christians. In case of an emergency, follow these directions: proclaim the message, be persistent, convince, rebuke, and encourage. This portion of 2 Timothy is packed with direct imperatives, succinct Christian theology, and an urgent call to action. It creates a sense that we have not done enough. We have not been vigilantly preaching the gospel 24-7. They practically squeeze the joy out of preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, many of us do not witness about our faith. So we are given an evangelist's job description, we are reminded

of what is central to our faith and our calling as a priesthood of all believers: salvation is through faith in Christ Jesus. We are to place the gospel in the context in which we minister and let it grow. We proclaim the gospel we know. Here the stress is on the sacred Scriptures, the oral tradition of the gospel, and sound doctrine.

In our times, there are plenty of inspired teachers writing books and offering seminars on spiritual matters. The gospel can get buried among the "new" messages. Many books create a frenzy of excitement with their promises of a "new" being, a "new" start. In fact, some of us study these books alongside the Bible. The desire for something new, like a spiritual fix or wisdom from on high, is part of what makes us human, and it is evident in every generation. As human beings we have a hunger, a thirst, a passion for what will inspire us and lift us out of the mundane, the ordinary. But the test of truth is whether through these teachers or teachings we are educated, convinced, rebuked, and encouraged in our faith. It may be possible that these books are reaching a group of people who do not attend church and never will. It may be possible that while these books offer a certain spin on the gospel, our job is to help make the connection between them and faith in Jesus Christ through which our salvation comes. When we place our faith in the latest book on Oprah's list, we will always be waiting for the next "new" message to come along and save us. Even though we seek the new and novel, it is God's grace that satisfies our longings.

The good news is that though we wander, though we turn away from the truth, though we seek other paths, our salvation has been accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is a very comforting passage of Scripture when we explain it in such a way that we accept the warning label for what it is and remember the front of the bottle—the grace of the gospel—"by grace you have been saved" ([Eph. 2:5](#)). Despite our faithlessness, God will always be there for us. As this letter urges, read the sacred writings and find the people of God wandering away or rebelling against God; stories of wandering and returning are throughout Scripture, and we can see our lives reflected in these biblical characters.

Think of Jacob, the heel grabber and crook who through his dirty deals becomes Israel, the one who struggles with God and prevails. Think of David, when Nathan is sent to

confront his adultery. Once David acknowledges his sin, the Lord puts it away and David does not die; there are consequences for his behavior, but he has a second chance. Think of the prodigal son, who is welcomed home after he has spent his inheritance. Think of Zacchaeus, condemned by his community as a greedy tax collector, but recognized by Jesus for his latent generosity. Think of the woman at the well, who has five husbands, but Jesus sees in her a hunger and thirst for living water. Think of Peter, who acts like a brave disciple but later denies Jesus when Jesus faces the cross. Jesus takes a risk. Peter becomes the rock upon which the church is built. Jesus is able to see potential in people that we may not see ourselves.

Along with Scripture we have several hymns in our collective history that offer this story of grace in the face of our wandering hearts and itching ears: "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," "Wherever I May Wander," and a hymn, "O God, How We Have Wandered." In singing, we confess, O to grace how great a debtor daily I am called to be! Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love; here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above. **Olive Elaine Hinnant**

A pastor serving in Montreal visited an agitated parishioner in the hospital during the final stages of a terrible disease. Kindly she sat down beside the woman and took her hand and began to read, "The LORD is my light ..." (Ps. 27:1), but before *she* could finish the sentence, *the patient* did, "... and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" The young minister began to read one comforting Scripture passage after another, only to have the patient take over the reading of each one—except the patient was not reading. The exercise quickly settled the patient like a baby at the mother's breast. As Timothy had learned the Scripture, so too these verses had been instilled in this woman from her earliest days, almost as if they had been given to her for that very purpose on that very day.

We also hear the testimony of the former Princeton scholar Emile Cailliet, who after the horrors of World War I found that his rationalistic upbringing had lost its hold. Nothing made sense until he opened a Bible and came to the Beatitudes and discovered when we read the

Bible, the Bible reads us. It is given to us to heighten our awareness of ourselves in relation to God.

The Bible does not need a disclaimer; rather, it needs a warning to those who would read it: "It is true. Do not just read it alone. You are outmatched." As we read it, we discover that above all we are outmatched by the love and grace of God who has given us his word and given us his Son, that we might know life eternal here and now and forevermore. **J. Peter Holmes**

Read and study the scriptures for in them we find the path to salvation; which can be believed and trusted. Read and study because we can share what we have learned and believed of God's faithfulness and love!

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