

2 TIMOTHY: How Not to Collapse

by Ray C. Stedman

In the sixty-eighth year of the 1st century there was an old man in a prison in Rome – a little circular cell about twenty feet in diameter – who was writing to a young man far across the Aegean and Adriatic Seas in Ephesus, and the subject of his letter was how to keep strong in the midst of a collapsing civilization. That is the theme of the second letter of Paul to his son in the faith, Timothy. And that seems an appropriate subject for this twentieth-century hour, doesn't it?

As Paul wrote to his young son in the faith, who was troubled by a weak constitution (a weak stomach, to be exact), and a fearful spirit – a timid outlook on life – and by intense persecution and challenges far beyond his natural power to handle, Paul realized that he himself was about to depart and be with the Lord, and that he was passing on the torch to this younger man. This word from the Apostle Paul's pen is the last that we have from him, then. It constitutes his swan song, his last words of exhortation, and it is peculiarly appropriate to the hour in which we live.

The first verse catches the key of this letter:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life which is in Christ Jesus, {2 Tim 1:1 RSV}

Have you ever thought of the gospel, or of Christianity, that way, “the promise of the life which is in Christ Jesus” – not life to come so much as life right now? It is generally agreed that one of the big problems faced by old and young alike is how to look at life. And one of the big obstacles in coming to a satisfactory view of life is that Christianity is seen somehow as a detour – that if you are a Christian, you have to give up most of the exciting things about life. But Christianity is anything but a detour around life. It is a highway right straight through the middle of it. It is the key to life; the fulfillment of the hunger and longing of

human hearts. And so, in this second letter to Timothy, the apostle is giving us this key to life.

Now he has four things that he wants to say to this young man, all of them important to him and all of them important to us. He puts them in the form of charges, or exhortations, that he gives to his son in the faith:

- The first one is, “guard the truth,”
- The second, “be strong in the Lord,”
- Third, “avoid traps and pitfalls along the way,”
- And, fourth, “preach the word.”

If I had to write to a young man today, I am sure I could never find anything better to say than those four exhortations.

In this letter the first note the apostle strikes is **guard the truth**. God has committed to Timothy a deposit of truth, which is his responsibility and Paul suggests certain ways to carry out this commission. Admittedly, this is addressed to a young man who is a pastor, the pastor of a great church in Ephesus. Timothy had the responsibility of shoring up the defenses of this church which were crumbling under the pressure of a secular society and a pagan attitude. But it is a word of advice that is needed by every Christian without exception, because to each Christian has been given the same deposit of truth – the fundamental revelation of the Scripture concerning the nature of reality: what the world is like; what God is like; what people are like; what you are like. What makes the world operate the way it does? Why does it fall apart all the time? Why is it that nothing good seems to prosper and everything evil seems to reign unchallenged? The explanation is the deposit of truth that has been given to us through Jesus Christ, and it is this that we are to guard.

Now the apostle suggests three specific ways to do this:

First, by exercising the spiritual gift that God has given to you.

Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control. {2 Tim 1:6-7 RSV}

If you want a more exact rendering of that verse, put it this way: “It is not God that gives us a spirit of timidity, but he gives a spirit of power and love and a sound mind.”

Someone asks me, what is going to happen in our relationships with Soviet Russia; with the Communist Chinese? What is going to happen in the Middle East? What is going to happen at election time? I do not know what is going to happen in the elections, or whether there will even be an election this year. I do not know; no one knows. But I know this, that it is not God that gives us a spirit of timidity. If we are anxious, if we are troubled, it is not from God. The Spirit of God is a spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind: a spirit of power in order to do, a spirit of love in order to react properly emotionally, and a sound mind in order to be intelligently purposeful about what we do. And the way to discover that is to exercise the spiritual gift that God has given you.

If you are a Christian, you can do something for God. You have an ability given you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within you, and if you are not putting that to work, you are wasting your life. It does not make any difference what you are doing, if it is not built around the exercise of that spiritual gift, it is all a waste of time, pointless, useless. And in the judgment of the Holy Spirit – the only judgment that counts – it will be counted as so much wood, hay, and stubble.

Now what has God given you to do?

Do you know? Have you found out yet?

Do you know what to look for, do you know how to find it? Find out, because in doing so you will discover that God does not give a spirit of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind. When you start exercising what God has given you, you discover that he is right with you to back it up. So that was the first word to Timothy on how to guard the truth, how to keep the faith.

A popular saying, and a book by Adam Clayton Powell, is *Keep The Faith, Baby*. I read the book, but I did not learn much on how to keep the

faith. How do you keep the faith? Well, you keep it by first exercising the spiritual gift. You see, our Christian faith is not a delicate, fragile flower that needs to be protected in some hothouse. Charles Spurgeon was exactly right when he said, “Truth is like a lion. Whoever heard of defending a lion? Turn it loose and it will defend itself.” That is what we need to do with this truth. We do not need to apologize for it with long, exegetical arguments as to why we should believe this, or why we should believe that. Just begin to exercise it – that is the admonition.

Second, the apostle says, guard the truth by suffering patiently. And he reminds Timothy that every Christian, without exception, is called to suffer for the gospel’s sake. “Oh,” you say, “that isn’t me. I don’t suffer.” And I think sometimes we tend to feel we have been excluded from this. It may be because we always think of suffering as something physical – torture and thumb-screws and iron maidens and being torn apart on the rack, this sort of thing. Well, Christians do suffer in this way from time to time. In fact, the 20th century is the most tortured Christian century of all. Did you know that? More Christians have been put to death for Christ’s sake in this century than in any other century since the very beginning.

But the suffering that is involved here is not only physical, it is mental as well. It is the kind of suffering we endure when somebody smiles knowingly and winks at our faith, or jibes at us, or laughs at us, or excludes us from an invitation list, or treats us with considerable and open disdain or contempt because we are a Christian; someone who pokes fun at a prayer meeting, or laughs at the Bible. We are to take this patiently, says the apostle. And as we react, not with anger or with disgust or vengeance, but quietly, patiently, as our Lord did, we guard the truth.

You know, one of the reasons the gospel is not widely accepted in many places today is that Christians have been impatient in suffering, have refused to take patiently the attitude of the world in this respect. Instead they have acted offended and hurt when people have treated them poorly, or they have given up and gone along with the crowd, refusing to take suffering for the Lord’s sake. Now you cannot challenge the world in its wrongness without its being offended. And although we must challenge it in the least offensive way possible, nevertheless the Scriptures make clear that there is

constantly a place for Christians' suffering, and it is one of the ways in which we guard the truth.

The third way Paul suggests in this first chapter is to "follow the pattern of the sound words," that is, to read and trust the Scriptures. I love that phrase, "the pattern of sound words." There are so many today who are departing from the pattern of sound words. They believe that some secular writer, out of the blindness and the darkness of his own heart, has more insight into the problems of life than the Scriptures. They repeat these arguments, or live according to this philosophy, and they soon find themselves engulfed in problems – often neuroses and psychoses and nervous reactions – and they do not understand why. Why is it that our age is suffering so from such a tempest of emotional disturbance? It is because in our blindness we have refused to follow the pattern of sound words.

And so to young Timothy Paul suggests these three ways to guard the truth: exercise your gift, suffer patiently, follow the pattern of sound words, and God will see you right through,

... for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. {2 Tim 1:12 RSV}

That is the proper way to read this verse. It is not, "what I have committed unto him," (as the King James Version has it); it is, "he is able to guard ... what has been deposited with me." That is, the truth – the body of faith. And as I perform faithfully what the apostle suggests, I discover that God protects that truth in my life, and protects me in it, and thus keeps me in the faith.

The second exhortation was, "**be strong in the Lord.**" It is important to understand that you never say this to somebody unless he is capable of fulfilling it. What is the use of saying "be strong" to somebody who is a physical weakling? And when Paul writes this to Timothy he realizes that this young man understands how to be strong. You see, Paul is not saying here how to be strong; you have to get that from other Scriptures. That is simply resting, learning how to trust in the work of Jesus Christ. That is the way to be strong in the Lord. But what Timothy needed was an exhorta-

tion to do it, to actually put it into practice. And that is what we need.

I once heard a little couplet at a conference I attended that helped me a great deal. One of the speakers said this:

When I try, I fail;
When I trust, he succeeds.

I like that. That puts it exactly, doesn't it? When I try, I fail, but when I trust, he succeeds – and that is the way the Christian life is lived.

Now there are three figures the apostle uses here to describe being strong in the Lord.

First, *be strong as a soldier*. The thought here is an utter dedication to the task. No sideline. Give yourself to this so that you might please him who has called you to be a soldier. How can you follow Christ if you are involved in a lot of other aims in life? You have several conflicting purposes. No, says Paul, if you want to be strong, be dedicated as a soldier is dedicated to one thing.

Second, *be strong as an athlete*. That means discipline: no shortcuts, no cutting corners or breaking the rules. Just as an athlete is not crowned unless he observes the rules, so if you are going to be a Christian do not take any moral shortcuts, but follow him.

Third, *follow him as a farmer*. That means diligence. Go to work on this; do not slow down. Any farmer knows that if he expects a crop in the fall he has to spend some time working and planting in the spring. And it ought to be that simple with the Christian. The Christian life is not one in which we simply relax while it rolls along its own way. No, it calls for diligence and discipline and reading and giving yourself to the task of knowing the Scriptures and deliberately applying the great principles of truth that you learn. And if you do these things, Paul says you will be able to be strong, strong in the Lord.

He closes this charge with a reminder of the strength of the Lord. Not merely to be strong, but be strong in the Lord.

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David. {2 Tim 1:8 RSV}

Two things about him to remember: he is a risen Christ, able to be with you at any moment, at any time; he is not limited in time and space and

geography; he is available to you now. And he is a human Christ. He has been where you are, he has been through what you are going through. He knows the pressures you feel, he has felt the same fear. “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David,” a risen and a human Christ.

The next charge extends from Chapter 2, Verse 14, to the end of Chapter 3. Here Paul is telling us to **avoid the traps and pitfalls** along the way, and he outlines three of these for us:

The first trap is *battles over words*. Have you ever seen the way Christians get all upset sometimes over some little word in Scripture – the mode of baptism, or the millennium – Christians dividing up into camps and choosing up weapons and battling it out. No, the apostle says, avoid this kind of thing. These are stupid and useless controversies and they will spread like gangrene. Not that these questions are not important; in a sense, they are. But there are areas in the Scriptures in which honest, searching, earnest scholars will find differences. Well then, avoid getting into controversies in those areas; do not make final decisions and divisions over that kind of thing.

Second, he says to *avoid dangerous passions*. Here is a word to a young man, a young man who felt the stirrings of passion within him – sexual drives and other hungers – living in a sex-saturated society much like ours. He was being told, “anything goes, satisfy yourself, it’s nothing but a natural urge,” and all the other propaganda and false doctrines that we hear from so many directions today. These were all hitting at Timothy, and Paul says, “Remember, Timothy, ...”

In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and earthenware, and some for noble use, some for ignoble. {2 Tim 2:20 RSV}

Now this is a beautiful figure because Paul is talking about the whole world as a great house. And he says God has certain kinds of people in that great house. There are those he uses for ignoble purposes and you will find that in contemporary history, God is using men and women to accomplish his will through ignoble ways, that is, wars. All war is ignoble, and yet God uses men in those wars killing and slaying, to accomplish his purpose.

But there are others who are used for noble purposes – not destructive, not divisive, but gathering and building, uniting, healing, and harmonizing. Each of us is going to be used of God in one way or another.

Now, he says if you want to be used for a noble purpose rather than for an ignoble purpose then separate yourself from these things that destroy your life.

... shun youthful passions and aim at righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart. {2 Tim 2:22 RSV}

One of the great destructive forces of our time is the looseness in sexual matters today. It is tearing apart the fabric of our civilization and yet men are blinded to this fact. But Christians are enlightened and instructed; therefore this word comes right home to us who are living in the midst of this loose society. “Shun youthful passions.” Do not suppress them, as Paul says in another place, but give thanks for them and walk honestly, in purity, before the Lord and God will use you for noble purposes not for ignoble.

And then the third trap or pitfall along the way was *a rebellious attitude*:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. {2 Tim 3:1 RSV}

I just note in passing that the “last days” here is not referring to the final end time of the church on earth. The last days include the whole period of time between the first and the second comings of Christ. From the very day that our Lord rose from the dead these were the “last days.” And in these last days, Paul says, there will come recurrent cycles of distress – we are going through one right now – when peace has forsaken the world and men are all upset; when there are strange, demonic forces at work in society creating immense problems. And through those times of distress we will see certain characteristics at play, and he lists them:

For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates,

fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. {2 Tim 3:2-5a RSV}

What to do? Here, basically, are the characteristics of rebellion, a lawless attitude. How do you avoid falling into this pit? Well, says the apostle, first of all, avoid such people. Do not join with them in their causes. He does not mean not to speak to them, but do not join them, do not associate with this kind of defiant rebellion.

And then, remember that this kind of rebellion always results in a rapid revelation of the weakness of it. This is what happened to Jannes and Jambres, those two magicians who withstood Moses before the court of Pharaoh {Exod 7:11}. And these people today will not get very far either, but their folly will be plain to all as was that of those two men. That is a comforting word in this hour of lawlessness, when we wonder how far today's lawless forces are going to go. Well, says Paul they won't go too far, because their folly will soon become obvious to all.

And then in the closing part of the chapter, the apostle tells Timothy the way out; again, it is two-fold – patience in suffering, and persistence in truth. “Remember the way I behaved “ he says to Timothy. “You watched me, you've seen how I've endured all the trials that came my way. Remember that if you're quietly patient in suffering and continue in the truth holding to the Scriptures and what God has said, you will find your way safely through all the involvements and the perils and the pitfalls of the world in which you live.”

And then comes his final charge:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word. {2 Tim 4:1-2a RSV}

Give this out. Proclaim it. Do not merely believe the word but talk about it, speak it, tell it to others. Declare the great truth that God has given you.

... be urgent in season and out of season, convince [those who are full of doubt], rebuke [those who are full of sin], and exhort

[those who are full of fear], ... {2 Tim 4:2b RSV}

Three things: convince, rebuke, and exhort to counteract the characteristics of a decaying age. And Timothy is to be motivated in this by two things:

- First he is to do it in view of the fact that he lives in the presence of God and Jesus Christ. A whole universe is watching us; our faithfulness is under observation all the time. God is watching Christ is watching, and in his presence we are to live.
- Second, he is to do it in view of the peril of the times.

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears ... {2 Tim 4:3a RSV}

Do not give way to this, Paul says. Speak the truth; proclaim the word.

Then he closes with this marvelous word of testimony of his own experience:

For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. {2 Tim 4:6-8 RSV}

That is magnificent – especially when you remember its setting. Here is the apostle in this tiny little cell, cramped and cold, in semi-darkness writing by the light of a sputtering lamp. He knows that his fate is sealed. He has already appeared once before Nero, that monstrous wretch of an emperor and now he must appear before him once more, and he knows what the result will be this time. He will be taken outside the city wall and with a flash of the sword, his head will roll in the dust, and that will be the end.

But you notice he is looking beyond all that. Death is but an incident to the believer. And Paul

is seeing the day when he appears before the Lord himself, when he is suddenly ushered into his presence, in which he has always been by faith, and he discovers himself with the Lord on that great Day. Yet, mixed with this is a very human element. Notice how he says to Timothy,

Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you; ... {2 Tim 4:11a RSV}

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. {2 Tim 4:13 RSV}

He is bored in mind, lonely in spirit, and cold in body. Though he could look beyond to all the greatness of the glory of God to come, see how human he is. Now there is nothing wrong with this. When we get cold or lonely or bored, we can just admit it freely; there is nothing sinful about that. But we must also look beyond these circumstances and add that dimension of faith that sees the reality of an unseen world, and changes the whole complexion of the circumstances in which we live. I have often thought about that appearance of Paul before Nero. He says:

But the Lord stood by me [at his first appearance] and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully, ... {2 Tim 4:17a RSV}

Isn't that challenging? Paul stood before that wretch, Nero, and proclaimed the word fully,

... that all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. {2 Tim 4:17b RSV}

That was his first appearance, but he knows it will be different this time. And in that day when Paul did stand before emperor the second time, the name of Nero was a name honored among men and known throughout the Empire. Who had heard of this; only little Jew from Tarsus, with his bald head

and his bowed legs and his poor speech? And yet today, 1900 years later, we name our sons *Paul*, and our dogs *Nero*.

Then he closes with some personal words to his friends. What a wonderful letter this is! What a challenge it must have been to young Timothy's heart. I would love to have gotten a letter like that from Paul, wouldn't you? And actually, that is what it is: He is writing to us as well –

- to stand firm,
- to hold fast to the pattern of sound words,
- to take our share of suffering for the gospel's sake with joy and equanimity of spirit

– not returning evil for evil, but good for evil, and remembering that he is able to keep that which he has deposited with us.

Prayer:

Our gracious Father, how these words have stirred our hearts anew as we find ourselves in a similar time of declension and despair. We ask that you who have called us with a holy calling and have imparted to us the Holy Spirit, and given to us your holy word, may keep us and make us to be faithful. Give us the diligence of a farmer, the discipline of an athlete, and the dedication of a soldier that will make us equal to the times in which we live. God grant that our eyes may be lifted above the commonplace obscurity of our daily life to the great things that lie beyond the invisible curtain and see ourselves living constantly in thy presence, even in this hour. Challenge our hearts to be strong in the midst of weakness, and to be faithful in the midst of that which is false. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.