

A few months ago, Philip Vickery preached on this passage. Let's take a fresh look.

2 Timothy is Paul's farewell discourse in the form of a letter, in which he summarises important issues Timothy should be aware of, should look out for, and should respond to. This is a very personal letter written to a "son", by his spiritual father and a very emotional letter, weaving personal advice, general counsel and theological reflection into a final message.

Woven into these messages, Paul speaks of "death", to drive home two critical messages: whilst reminding Timothy that his own death is imminent, Paul's main message is that he is assured, death is not the final frontier. Jesus Christ has (burst) open the gateway to life, by breaking the barrier of death which holds us back from God: *Jesus Christ who abolished death (1:10), Remember, Jesus Christ (is) risen from the dead (2:8)*. This is the entire Christian message - Jesus put an end to, eliminated, destroyed, invalidated death, which separates us from God, and opened the gateway to eternal life with Him. The Christian message is not about doing good, obeying laws, festivals and rituals, attending church ... The Christian message is not about worshipping the cross, because it is empty; not about searching for the tomb or burial grounds, because these too are empty. The Christian message is to believe the Christ, who came from heaven to live among us, and die the worst possible death, so that He could break its grasp, which restrains us from eternal life with God.

This letter is about encouragement, encouraging Timothy to remember his spiritual heritage, encouraging Timothy to "fan into flame" the gift God has given him, encouraging Timothy not to be ashamed of proclaiming God's message of salvation and deliverance, **which God had prepared before the creation of this world**, and encouraging Timothy to be assured, the One in whom he has placed his trust, will guard him until that Day, that which has been entrusted to him.

The greatest gift any person can give another, is the gift of encouragement.

The greatest gift a Christian can give another Christian, however, is also the gift of encouragement, **but** the source of which is Christ Himself. In Christ is our hope of eternity with God, and this should be the source of all encouragement.

How does this source of encouragement work? We Christians are often accused of having “blind faith” and chasing after “hope in vain”, because we do not know when this “hope” of eternity with God will materialise.

How then, does the hope which Christ gives us, which we celebrated with the cup a short while ago, become encouragement to us?

Paul offers Timothy a two-fold approach to Christ-focussed encouragement: *You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. i.e. be strong in the strength of Christ Jesus, which He gives you (yours to have).* Paul gave the same counsel to the Church in Ephesus, *Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might (6:10).*

Looking around the world at some of the absolute horrible evil that is gripping society, murders of the innocent by shooting and stabbing, beheading and slitting of the throat in public, the impunity with which fraud is taking place, cheating honest and upright people, we feel helpless, not only should this happens to us, but also as we hear and see these evil things happening, we hear ourselves saying, *what **could** I have done?*

This helplessness is a good thing, in that, it is a recognition of the fact, we as Christians cannot stand against that which appears to be “super-human” power, against the enemy who instigates and carries out these heinous and vile acts; we must, therefore, rely upon and draw on God’s own might, the strength we saw demonstrated by Christ on the cross.

How do we access God's strength to deal with our own problems?

To the Church in Ephesus Paul said, *Pray all the time, without ceasing. Ask God for anything in line with the Holy Spirit's wishes. Plead with him, reminding him of your needs, and keep praying earnestly for all Christians everywhere (6:18)*, which is intercessory prayer we talked about a few weeks ago.

The first approach to encouragement which is Christ-focussed is, *Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might (Ephesians 6:10)*

We cannot encourage another with our own strength; we may be going through difficult times, sickness, disease, aches and pains, finances, and we may not have what it takes to encourage another person. **BUT**, when we have experienced encouragement by the Holy Spirit, because of our relationship with Christ, we can encourage the other person to do the same: look to the one from whom we ourselves have found encouragement, pointing them to the strength of God's might, praying for them that they might be encouraged by the One who encourages us!

Paul's second suggested approach to encouragement is, *Share with faithful people, the things you have heard from me, spoken in the presence of many witnesses, that these men (and women) will also be able to teach others.*

True encouragement, is to share with trusted and faithful people, the message of Christ which we hear, who can teach others and encourage them. As this "sharing of the message" continues, encouragement spreads.

Paul offers Timothy, the example of three occupations which spread encouragement. The first occupation is that of the **soldier** who sets the example of satisfying and making happy the one who enlisted them. Like the soldier, we draw encouragement from our Commanding Officer who

knows the enemy and has a battle plan to win the war. We are enlisted by the Holy Spirit, to follow Christ, who leads us into God's presence.

The second occupation which spreads encouragement is that of the **athlete**, who demonstrates discipline to play by the rules. As the athlete learns self-control, restraint and submission to the authority of his/her trainer, they excel in their sport which results in being crowned.

The disciple James says, *Blessed is the person who remains steadfast under trial, for when he/she has stood the test he/she will receive the **crown** of life, which God has promised to those who love Him.*¹

Peter, the one who denied three times, he ever knew Jesus and was restored by Jesus to "feed His sheep" says, *And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading **crown** of glory.*²

In a wonderful picture of what our lives should be, Jesus reveals to the disciple John, *Be faithful unto death (when you die), and I will give you the **crown** of life*³.

The athlete encourages us to practice strict discipline and play by the rules, in order to receive the crown, and so we should be encouraged to do the same.

The third and final occupation which spreads encouragement is that of the **farmer** who tills the soil, sows seed, waters it and weeds it, labouring all the while, not knowing what the outcome will be. Surely, the hard-working farmer deserves the first share of the crops! So be encouraged as the Farmer is encouraged.

Finally, Paul offers Timothy, both fatherly advice and professional counsel. *Think over and reflect on these things I am saying, understand them and*

¹ James 1:12

² 1 Peter 5:4

³ Revelation 2:10

grasp their application, for the Lord will grant you full insight and understanding in everything.

Don't do what I have said, just because I told you, and don't follow my advice blindly. *Think and reflect on what I am saying, make every effort to understand, which means to read, study and uncover, and when you do this, God Himself will give you His wisdom and insight, and everything will become clear to you.*

Don't follow me blindly, because I am human and fallible and might have made a mistake. Do your part of understanding what I have said and God will help you understand, fully!

To pray for others, intercessory prayer, is an important part of being a follower of Christ. To encourage others to be encouraged as Christ Himself has encouraged us, is also an important part of being a follower of Christ.

The truth is this: by ourselves, we are powerless to anything about the evil in this world. God has a plan to deal with this evil, and His plan is being worked out as we live and worship Him. As we wait on God for His perfect time, we are called to pray without ceasing for each other, interceding with everything we have for one another, and we are called to encourage each other, first by demonstrating how God encourages us, in our lives and through our occupation, then by encouraging others to seek the same encouragement from Christ Himself, and enjoy the fruits of that relationship. **AMEN.**