

2 Timothy 4:9-22

Introduction

We come to the last scene from 2 Timothy, the very last words Paul ever wrote. The end was very close now. As a Roman citizen it was his privilege to be beheaded rather than crucified. From the Christian point of view, He was about to be with Christ, in the nearer presence of the Lord, and into a state far better than this life.

It is a tragic and sad picture in some ways – sad that he did not leave life in a blaze of glory with friends and family singing a doxology. He was indeed a creature of flesh and blood, a frail human being with ordinary human needs. He must have been lonely. He had been let down by some Christians. It would have been cold. He had nothing to occupy his mind, no hope of release, only death to await.

He mentions over a dozen names in this chapter, some of whom are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, and some who are only mentioned here. We are going to focus on just four of these names and see what is to be learnt from them. The first was a faithful friend, the second a restored backslider, the third a tragic apostate, and the fourth a confident martyr – Luke, Mark, Demas, and Paul himself.

Luke the faithful friend

Only Luke is with me (2 Timothy 4:11). The scene is one of intense loneliness and isolation. He had plenty of friends, but they were not with him in this, his hour of need. They were busy of their Master's business in many places, and could not be with Paul just when he would have loved to see them for one last time. Luke, the beloved physician (Colossians 4:14), alone, was with him.

Besides the few dominant characters in the New Testament, there are many secondary characters, mentioned only occasionally, and at times we get just a glimpse of the kind of people they were. Among these is Luke. He had been a good and faithful friend to Paul over many years, accompanying Paul on his missionary journeys, recording them in "The Acts of the Apostles". (Luke's two books, the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, makes up 27% of the New Testament) He had been at Philippi with Paul, staying in Lydia's home (Acts 16:11,15), with Paul on his last journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20:6), and on that last treacherous voyage to Rome when they were shipwrecked (Acts 21:17). He shared Paul's first and second imprisonments in Rome (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11). As both a doctor and a friend, he had ministered to Paul in every way. Paul called him a "fellow labourer" – he did not just talk – he worked.

Here was a friend who was loyal to death. He was one of the back room boys who made the great apostle's work possible. He totally dedicated his skills and gifts to the Lord. R.M.McCheyne, who died aged 29 after setting the city of Dundee alight for God, once said he wanted to live so as to be missed. This is certainly how Luke lived his life.

Mark the restored backslider

Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry (2 Timothy 4:11). It is such a relief to read these words. For a long time Mark had been a real disappointment, despite such a promising start. Mary, his mother, had the house in Jerusalem that was the headquarters of the early church. Mark went with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey, but returned home when they got as far as Cyprus (Acts 13:13). His cousin Barnabas wanted to give him a second chance on the second missionary journey, but Paul was not having it (Acts 15:38). Mark was the cause of a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, leading to them going their separate ways, and never working together again. There is no record of what Mark did over the next twenty years. Then Mark is mentioned as being with Paul on his first imprisonment when he wrote to the Colossians (Colossians 4:10). Paul urged the Colossians not to let Mark's past stand in the way of welcoming him. And now when the end is very near, Paul expresses this desire to see Mark again. Though a one time deserter and quitter, Mark was now a man useful for ministry.

The story of Mark rings a bell with many of our hearts. This man failed, let the Lord down, and disappointed others. We have all been there, so we cannot point the finger at him. But the past can be forgiven, failures can be blotted out. The Lord can deal with the most shameful burden we may be carrying. Think of the other famous deserter and quitter in the Old Testament – Jonah – yet: **The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time** (Jonah 3:1). God gives second chances – and third and fourth. The Gospel is all about forgiveness, second chances, strength for weaklings and courage for cowards.

*“O Jesus, full of truth and grace,
More full of grace than I of sin,
Yet once again I seek Thy face.
Open Thine arms and take me in,
And freely my backslidings heal
And love this faithless sinner still.”*

Demas the tragic apostate

For Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me (2 Timothy 4:10). If Mark brought an occasion of happiness to Paul's last days, Demas was the cause of grief. Demas is mentioned three times in the New Testament. In Philemon 24 he is described as “my fellow labourer”, but now he has deserted, and gone back to Thessalonica in Greece. Over the years Paul had prayed for Demas, given him endless hours of teaching, entrusted him with Christian work, and worked side by side with him. Now he had turned away and left him in the lurch when he needed him most. Demas went in the opposite direction to Mark. Mark's lapse was temporary, and caused by fear and cowardice. But Demas's backsliding was caused because of his love of the present age, and it was permanent.

Maybe it was because he never was truly converted and his heart was not changed. It is possible to have the light and not have life. Maybe he was what the Puritans called “a temporary believer”, like Judas Iscariot. In some cases this happens when there is family pressure, or pressure from friends, to make a person become a Christian, or

some emotional experience that attracts them to the idea of becoming a Christian. But like the seed that falls on stony ground (Mark 4), it springs up at first, but gets scorched by the sun and withers away because there is no root. Or like the seed on the thorny ground where thorns choke the seed and it gives no fruit.

There is a world of difference between a temporary lapse from which there can be recovery in time, and absolute rejection of the Gospel which was once professed and a return to the world which has rejected God. "I saw that there was a way to hell even from the very gates of heaven" (John Bunyan, in *Pilgrim's Progress*).

Demas is a warning beacon. Ask God to do a deep and permanent work. Make sure your faith is not resting on emotion or pressure, but from a heart changed by Him, and endeavour by His grace to follow on to know the Lord. **Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus** (Philippians 3:13,14).

Paul the confident martyr

We have already seen in passing the unhappy and undesirable plight of Paul in his very last days on earth. He was lonely and deserted, with only Luke for companionship, longing that Timothy and Mark might make it to visit him before winter makes travel dangerous. Besides the sad memory of Demas, there are bitter memories of Alexander who did him great harm, acting as an informer (2 Timothy 4:14), and regret at the Christians in the church at Rome who did not speak up in his defence at his trial (2 Timothy 4:16). Had they been ashamed of him? Did they forget what they owed him? Were they too busy looking after themselves? If ever an accused man needed help, it was now – and they deserted him. These must have been hard thoughts to live with.

But then he recalls his good friends like Priscilla, Aquila and Erastus. Human friendship and companionship and nearness and support are very important. We miss it when we have not got it. Some super spiritual people may claim they are never lonely; they don't need friends because they have Christ's companionship which satisfies all their needs. But human friendship is a loving provision of God. He blesses and helps and comforts us through the support of others. The presence of Christ is wonderful, but it is not intended to replace or displace human friendships.

Besides the need for companionship, Paul had material needs. He wanted a cloak, an outer garment of heavy material, to keep him warm. And he wanted his scrolls, especially the parchments (2 Timothy 4:13). Were the parchments Old Testament Scriptures, or early drafts of the Gospels about Christ's life and teaching, or were they legal documents, including his certificate of Roman citizenship? We do not know.

History has a strange way of repeating itself. William Tyndale was held in prison in Belgium, awaiting death, during a cold damp winter, and he sent a message to a friend: "Send me, for Jesus' sake, a warm cap, something to patch my leggings, a woollen shirt, and above all my Hebrew Bible that I may spend my time in that pursuit."

So we have this sad and in some ways unhappy picture of the great apostle, at the end of a life of triumphant service, but now in need of friends, clothing and books. It is not unspiritual to admit this. These are natural needs of mortal men and women. “Never for one moment are we de-naturalized by grace” (H.Moule). There is no need to deny our own frailty and humanity, or pretend that we are more than dust.

The remarkable thing is that despite these sad circumstances, Paul faces the future with such confidence and anticipation. He could look back and remember that even when no one came forward to speak in his defence and support him, the Lord had been there standing with him. **The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength** (2 Timothy 4:17). How reminiscent of his words to the Philippians **I can do all things in union with him who keeps on pouring strength into me** (Philippians 4:13). No wonder he encouraged others to have the same strength: **Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might** (Ephesians 6:10).

The Lord made him strong, and enabled him to boldly witness to the truth of the Gospel, and delivered him from “the lion’s mouth”, probably a reference to Emperor Nero, or else to Satan or death. His experience in the past gives him comfort for the present, and confidence for the future. **The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom** (2 Timothy 4:18). He knew he could never be separated from the love of Christ Jesus, and that immediately on death he would go straight to the heavenly kingdom. His body would be on the block, but his soul would be in heaven.

This is the testimony of Scripture – that death is the gateway to heaven immediately. **You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory** (Psalm 73:24). **"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."** (Luke 23:43). **For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain** (Philippians 1:21). **We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord** (2 Corinthians 5:8).

However black and bleak our situation, however lonely and discouraged, the believer always has this confidence. **The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength** (2 Timothy 4:17).

*"When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me."*

And in that last dread hour, the believer will go immediately to be with Christ in heaven. He will not merely be in an unconscious state, nor in purgatory, but with Christ at once. No wonder Paul ends with the words, **To him be the glory for ever and ever, Amen.**