Enduring

Believers must remain faithful to God’s truth even when facing persecution.

My mother’s father was a gospel preacher. I still have fond and vivid memories of his gentle spirit and soft-spoken ways. My father commented at Granddad’s funeral that he had never heard the man say anything bad about anyone. My father went on to say that if Granddad found himself in a conversation that turned critical of another person, he quickly interjected something positive about the person. He did not want to participate in behind-the-back negative criticism of others.

I was attending college classes on the day I received word that my grandfather had suffered a severe stroke. He died a few days later. In his late seventies at the time, he had retired after many years as a pastor and director of missions. But he never stopped preaching. That very week, in fact, he had been preaching at a week-long revival meeting, speaking in both morning and evening services. He had just finished preaching the final sermon of the week when the stroke hit. It was the last sermon of his long and faithful preaching ministry. I believe my grandfather finished everything God had given him to do. Like the apostle Paul, my grandfather could say that he had fought the good fight, finished the course, and kept the faith.

In this session’s Bible passages, Paul challenged Timothy to preach God’s Word faithfully “in season and out of season” (2 Tim. 4:2). Paul testified that he himself had done so and would soon stand before the Lord to receive a crown of righteousness. We too will be encouraged in this session to faithfully serve Christ to the end of our lives.

Understand the Context

2 Timothy 3:1–4:22

After an appeal for Timothy to deal gently with opponents (2 Tim. 2:24-25), Paul turned his attention to a final charge against the false teachers. Timothy
could expect to minister in what could be described as “hard times” (3:1). These times would be marked by selfishness and greed, with people “holding to the form of godliness but denying its power” (3:5). False teachers would prey on the gullible and resist Timothy’s message of sound teaching. Paul had previously confronted the issue of false teachers in 1 Timothy.

Timothy would have two resources to complete his mission: his knowledge of those people who had taught him and the Scriptures that he had been taught. Paul charged Timothy in the presence of God and Christ Jesus to fulfill the ministry God had given to him. Evidently Paul’s death was imminent, and Timothy would need to be diligent if he was to finish well.

The end of 2 Timothy gives real insight into Paul’s Christian character. Even in prison Paul kept informed about the progress (or lack thereof) of the people who had ministered with him. Some had abandoned the work (Demas), others were deeply involved in ministry (Titus, Tychicus), and Luke was still faithfully by Paul’s side. Even with his death approaching, Paul was concerned about his books and parchments, which perhaps were copies of selected Old Testament books and other writings. Paul’s main concern at the end of his life was what it had been throughout his ministry: that he might “fully preach the word and all the Gentiles might hear it” (4:17).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PERSECUTION COMING (2 Tim. 3:12-13)

VERSE 12

In fact, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Timothy had been a faithful coworker in the gospel, emulating Paul’s Christlike character as well as the example of enduring persecution that Paul had faced (see 2 Tim. 3:10-11). The risk of persecution was real not only for Timothy but also for all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus. Such believers are characterized by a desire to live out their faith in a Christ-honoring way. They were the opposite of the false teachers who held to “the form of godliness” but denied its power (3:5).

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul had encouraged the Ephesian Christians to live “a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim. 2:2). He also had challenged Timothy to train himself in godliness, since it was “beneficial in every way” both “for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:7-8). The hostility of the world to the message of the gospel
was evident in Paul’s life, as it had been in Jesus’ earthly existence. Timothy had been challenged to “share in suffering” (2 Tim. 2:3). This suffering would not be limited to a group of spiritually elite church leaders but in fact was a real possibility for all believers.

VERSE 13

Evil people and impostors will become worse, deceiving and being deceived.

Paul based his warning about faithful believers facing persecution on the worsening condition of the world. He foresaw that evil people and impostors (“seducers,” KJV) would only become worse. The Greek word translated impostors originally referred to those who practiced sorcery and other forms of dark magic. It came to be used also to depict anyone who was particularly skillful at deceiving others with fast talk and fake miracles. Previously in 2 Timothy 3:8, Paul had given a historical example of two such deceivers, Jannes and Jambres, the names given in Jewish tradition to two occult magicians in Pharaoh’s court who mimicked Moses’ sign from the Lord (see Ex. 7:10-11). The false teachers in Ephesus were being deceived no less than the pagan magicians of old, and they were likewise deceiving others.

Paul referred to persecution that would come to believers as a result of their stand for Christ and against false teachings. As the false teachers hurried down the path of deception, believers could expect persecution to gain momentum as well. Believers today as well should not be surprised when their efforts to live godly lives are met by misunderstanding and hostility in the world (see 1 Pet. 4:12-16).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Persecution” on page 1248 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. In what ways do you see the persecution of believers growing worse in today’s world? What is a right way and a wrong way to avoid persecution as a believer?

GET EQUIPPED (2 Tim. 3:14-17)

VERSE 14

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. You know those who taught you,
The false teachers in Ephesus had “departed from the truth” (2 Tim. 2:18) and were headed into an even worse situation (see 3:13). With the words but as for you, Paul contrasted the path taken by the false teachers to the path Timothy needed to take. Timothy needed to continue in what he had learned and firmly believed. That is, his teaching needed to agree with “the sound teaching of [the] Lord Jesus Christ and with the teaching that promotes godliness” (1 Tim. 6:3). The Greek word translated firmly believed could refer either to an inner confidence of something’s being true or to a consistency in faithful living. In Timothy’s case, both understandings have merit. Timothy knew well the gospel message Paul had taught him; further, Timothy had committed to faithfully live out the truth.

Once again, Paul reminded his young coworker of the believers who had invested themselves in Timothy’s spiritual life (those who taught you). Paul no doubt included himself in the group of Timothy’s teachers, but he also likely had in mind Timothy’s grandmother and mother, both of whom had modeled saving faith in front of Timothy (see 2 Tim. 1:5).

VERSE 15

and you know that from infancy you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Not only did Timothy’s grandmother and mother serve as examples of what it meant to believe in Christ, they also taught him from infancy ... the sacred Scriptures. Jewish parents typically began teaching the Old Testament Scriptures to their children at about five years of age. The Greek phrase rendered the sacred Scriptures (“the holy scriptures,” KJV; “the sacred writings,” ESV) appears in this form only here in the New Testament.

The Greek word translated to give ... wisdom can also be translated “to teach” or “to instruct.” The purpose of Scripture was not (and is not) merely to dispense knowledge for knowledge’s sake but rather to lead people to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. The Scriptures point to Jesus, in whom salvation is available to all who believe (see John 5:39).

VERSE 16

All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness,

This verse evokes several questions. First, what writings did Paul include at the time under the heading of all Scripture? At the least he was referring to the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. Possibly, the Christian movement
had already begun as well to recognize one or more of the Gospels and some of Paul’s letters as Scripture (see 2 Pet. 3:16). From the perspective of church history, believers today can have confidence that the phrase all Scripture rightly includes the sixty-six books found in the Bible.

Second, what is meant by the assertion that all Scripture is inspired by God (“breathed out by God,” ESV; “God-breathed,” NIV)? Bible scholars offer two possible ways to understand the idea. First, Paul may have been emphasizing the Scripture’s God-given power to “breath out” God’s Spirit to those hearing or reading it. An alternate view—one that I prefer—is the understanding that God’s Spirit is the Source of all Scripture. The Spirit “breathed on” the various human writers of the Bible so that the words they wrote communicated precisely and without error the Word of God. Thus, the Scriptures are not only true but also are powerful in effect. They accomplish everything God intended for them to accomplish (see Isa. 55:11).

Third, what are the inspired Scriptures able to accomplish when people hear, read, and study them? Paul already had affirmed that the Scriptures are able to give someone “wisdom for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). In addition to that life-changing gift, however, the Scriptures also are profitable (“useful,” NIV) for the believer’s spiritual growth, endurance, and leadership. Specifically, the Scriptures provide inspired teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. Paul used the Greek term rendered teaching to emphasize the sound instruction found in God’s Word.

The term rendered rebuking (“reproof,” KJV; ESV) means “to express strong disapproval.” Timothy needed to use the Scriptures in confronting the false teachers and in condemning the sinful conduct their errors were producing. Similarly, Timothy could depend on the authority of the Scriptures in correcting all who were following the false teachers. This Greek word carries the sense of correcting someone for the purpose of restoration. Timothy was to show believers in the Scriptures how they were to think and live as Christians.

The Greek word translated training (“instruction,” KJV) refers to the act of guiding a person into responsible living. Paul used the same word in Ephesians 6:4 when he challenged Christian fathers to bring up their children “in the training and instruction of the Lord.” The Scriptures, properly understood and applied, can guide believers into the moral and ethical conduct that pleases God. If the believers in Ephesus were to avoid the errors of the false teachers and grow in holiness, then they must turn to the Scriptures.

**VERSE 17**

so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.
Paul emphasized the practical reason for studying Scripture: **so that** every believer—and church leaders in particular—may be complete, equipped for every good work. The Greek phrase rendered the man of God appears frequently in the Septuagint [sep TOO uh jint] (an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) in reference to well-known leaders of God’s people such as Moses (see Deut. 33:1; Josh. 14:6) as well as unidentified messengers who brought God’s message to people (see Judg. 13:6; 1 Sam. 2:27).

The idea that Christians are saved not by good works but so that they may do good works appears frequently in Paul’s letters to Timothy. Christian women are to adorn themselves with good works (1 Tim. 2:10). Believing widows are to be known for good works (1 Tim. 5:10). Christians who are wealthy should be rich in good works (1 Tim. 6:17-18). Those who seek to serve as church overseers are pursuing a good work (1 Tim. 3:1). Believers who purify themselves will be “prepared for every good work” (2 Tim. 2:21).

The Greek word rendered complete describes one who is prepared for a function and as such is able to meet the demands of the task. The word rendered equipped is a related form of the same Greek word and thus forms a word play in Greek, highlighting the total readiness of the believer to do the good work of gospel ministry. Timothy had been thoroughly prepared to lead the church in Ephesus by the spiritual training he received from his grandmother and mother, from Paul, and most importantly from the Scriptures.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Inspiration of Scripture” on pages 807–809 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How does the Scriptures’ being inspired by God give you confidence in their truthfulness and effectiveness?

**PREACH HIS WORD (2 Tim. 4:1-4)**

**VERSE 1**

*I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and because of his appearing and his kingdom:*

Paul called on God the Father and Christ Jesus the Son to witness and affirm the challenge he was about to give Timothy. The Greek term rendered solemnly charge means “to bear testimony under oath about the truth of something of great importance.” The term appears in Acts 2:40 and 8:25 in
reference to believers’ testimony of the gospel message. Also, Paul had used the term in his first letter to challenge Timothy to lead without showing favoritism (see 1 Tim. 5:21).

The basis of Paul’s charge in 2 Timothy 4:1 can be divided into two sections. First, Paul challenged Timothy on the basis that Christ would one day **judge the living and the dead**. One emphasis of this phrase is that Christ will be the ultimate Judge of all people. Another emphasis is that both believers (the living) and unbelievers (the dead) will one day stand before Christ in judgment. Believers will stand before Him to give account of their service and to receive their rewards for faithfulness (see 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). Unbelievers will stand before Him at the final judgment to be condemned to the lake of fire (see Rev. 20:11-15).

Second, Paul challenged Timothy on the basis of Christ’s return (his appearing) and the culmination of God’s rule (his kingdom). Paul’s point is clear. In light of Christ’s lordship and His certain return to culminate God’s kingdom and judge the world, Timothy needed to take seriously both the urgency and eternal importance of gospel ministry.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Second Coming” on pages 1423–1424 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In what ways does the certainty of Christ’s return and judgment motivate you to serve Him with all urgency and seriousness?

**VERSE 2**

**Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; rebuke, correct, and encourage with great patience and teaching.**

Paul moved from the basis of his charge to Timothy to its content. He expressed his solemn challenge using five imperatives. First, he charged Timothy to **preach the word**. The Greek word rendered *preach* literally means “to serve as a herald.” Paul used a noun form of this word to refer to his role as a gospel preacher (see 1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11). Likewise, Timothy was to proclaim the gospel.

Second, Paul challenged Timothy to **be ready in season and out of season**. The phrase **be ready** emphasizes staying prepared. Timothy could do that by continually studying the Scriptures and using them in his efforts to lead the Ephesian church (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17). The phrase **in season and out of season** could refer either to Timothy’s situation or to the congregation’s
willingness to follow Timothy’s leadership. Perhaps, however, Paul was referring to both understandings as he challenged Timothy to stay spiritually focused no matter what fears arose or how believers might respond to him.

The final three imperatives (rebuke, correct, and encourage) had to do primarily with Timothy’s leadership in relation to the false teachers. To counter their destructive work, Timothy would need to exhibit calm courage in confronting them, exposing what was false and expounding the truth, and encouraging them to repent of their false teaching.

Paul further urged Timothy to carry out the imperatives of rebuking, correcting, and encouraging with great patience and teaching. Paul had made a similar emphasis in 2 Timothy 2:24-25. Not everyone would respond immediately to Timothy’s leadership, but he should keep on leading faithfully.

VERSE 3

For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, will multiply teachers for themselves because they have an itch to hear what they want to hear.

Paul explained the reason that Timothy needed to stay spiritually ready: the time would come when people would not tolerate sound doctrine. Of course, this tragedy already was occurring in Ephesus to some degree. Much of Paul’s letters to Timothy was concerned with false teachers and their destructive impact. False teaching would be a constant and even worsening problem for churches in the years to come. People would no longer tolerate (“endure,” KJV; ESV; “put up with,” NIV) the true gospel.

Paul warned that immature Christians would tire of hearing sound gospel preachers and would listen instead to their own desires. Accordingly, such believers (and churches) would multiply teachers for themselves who would preach only what they want to hear. The phrase have an itch to hear literally means “to scratch the ear.” Sound biblical teaching does more than tickle a listener’s ear; it pierces the heart and demands change (see Heb. 4:12).

VERSE 4

They will turn away from hearing the truth and will turn aside to myths.

Once again Paul mentioned the kind of false teaching that was already present in the Ephesian church. Immature Christians would turn away from hearing the truth and would turn aside to myths. Paul was warning Timothy that, because even immature Christians often want to learn
something new—in other words, their ears itch to hear something—it is all the more important that they receive sound doctrinal teaching. Otherwise, they would be drawn to the false teachers’ mythical stories that offered no benefit in helping believers grow in their faith.

**FINISH WELL** (2 Tim. 4:5-8)

**VERSE 5**

*But as for you, exercise self-control in everything, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.*

Paul again expressed his expectations for Timothy in terms of imperatives (compare 4:2). First, Paul challenged Timothy to **exercise self-control in everything** (“be sober-minded,” ESV; “keep your head,” NIV). The term literally referred to avoiding intoxication from strong drink. Timothy needed to maintain Spirit-empowered self-control in everything (see Eph. 5:18).

Second, Paul directed Timothy to **endure hardship**. The young church leader could look to both Christ and Paul as examples of enduring suffering for the sake of the gospel (see 2 Tim. 2:8-13).

Third, Timothy needed to faithfully **do the work of an evangelist**. The church came to recognize an evangelist as one of several gifted types of leaders God gave the church to equip the saints for ministry (see Eph. 4:11-12). In the context of 2 Timothy, Paul may have been referring simply to the work of proclaiming the gospel to the lost world.

Fourth, Paul challenged Timothy to **fulfill his ministry** (“discharge all the duties of your ministry,” NIV). The general term rendered ministry covered all the aspects of church leadership Timothy needed to carry out.

**VERSE 6**

*For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time for my departure is close.*

Paul reflected on his circumstances and what lay ahead for him not only in regard to his likely execution but also in terms of his appearance before the Lord as Judge. The phrase **being poured out as a drink offering** (“ready to be offered,” KJV) translates a single Greek word that describes the drink offering poured on the altar in Israelite worship (see Gen. 35:14). Paul thus viewed his impending death as a sacrifice poured out to God. The verb tense indicates that Paul viewed the sacrifice as being already in progress.

He then reiterated his thoughts by using another metaphor: **the time for my departure is close**. The Greek word rendered departure could describe sailors launching a ship or soldiers breaking camp.
VERSE 7

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

In this verse, Paul used three analogies to summarize his faithfulness in life and ministry since becoming a follower of Christ. The words fought the good fight described Paul’s ongoing activities in carrying out the gospel mission Christ had given him. The Greek word rendered fight could refer generally to the struggle involved in any type of athletic contest. Paul had not thrown in the towel or simply yielded to the gospel’s opponents. He fought to the end.

If the words the good fight focused on the ongoing struggle, the words finished the race focused on the finish line, the completion of Paul’s life and work on earth. He would finish well and could expect to hear his Lord say, “Well done!” Finally, Paul could say that he had kept the faith. Paul had faithfully discharged the task that had been given to him. Moreover, he had not watered down the gospel message or its demands for holy living.

VERSE 8

There is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, but to all those who have loved his appearing.

Finally, Paul reflected on what lay in store for him at the judgment of rewards for believers in the end time (on that day). He had all confidence that the Lord, the righteous Judge, has reserved for him the crown of righteousness. Probably we should understand the crown to be the gift of righteousness itself. That is, the believer’s reward for trusting Christ to the end of life will be a purified, holy, fulfilled life that pleases God.

Paul encouraged Timothy by stating that the crown of righteousness awaited all those who have loved (“longed for,” NIV) Christ’s appearing—namely, His second coming. Faithful servants of Christ long for His return; it will usher in the everlasting kingdom of God. May that anticipation motivate us in our day to fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Using verse 7 as a guide, how would you describe your life and service to Christ at this time? What can you do to be more in line with the way Paul viewed his life and ministry?