



## Feeling Abandoned

### 2 Timothy 4:6-18

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Over the past couple months we have been looking at some of the more difficult sayings of Jesus – some of the quotes of Jesus that are often easier to lay to the side. By diving deeper into the Biblical text, by giving more attention to these challenging teachings, we have claimed a more authentic understanding of Jesus as the preacher and teacher he was, and have claimed a more faithful invitation to discipleship today. Over the past 2,000 years, a lot of Biblical facts have been glossed over, ignored, or erroneously taught for the purpose of allowing the Church to maintain power and relevance at the expense of upholding the truth.

I am thankful to be a part of this community, who believes that there is a greater faithfulness to be found in full truth and transparency, even as it might contradict some of our denominational and religious traditions. I believe we can both be fully honest about the contextual and problematic issues of our past, while also claiming the promise of God to offer hope and new life in and through the brokenness of humanity today.

With that transparency at the forefront of the conversation, our text today comes from 2 Timothy. This letter is one of three that is lumped together under the title of the Pastoral Epistles, which include 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. A couple things are worth noting about the Pastoral Epistles before we look at our reading for this morning in 2 Timothy 4.

The Pastoral Epistles, though seemingly written to two individuals (Timothy and Titus), are laden with instructions to the larger Church. The use of the plural pronoun for “you” (like y’all) is found throughout these three documents, indicating that, while Timothy and Titus were significant leaders in the early church (leaders who would follow in Paul’s apostolic footsteps), the words of instruction and guidance in these letters are offered to the whole of the faith community. Though we are not Timothy and Titus, we have much to learn in the way of discipleship from reading these words.

I also think it’s important to note, again from a place of transparency and truth-telling, that though these texts are often attributed to the apostle Paul, “by the end of the twentieth century New Testament scholarship was virtually unanimous in affirming that the Pastoral Epistles were written some time after Paul’s death.”<sup>1</sup> It is believed Paul is *not the author* of these three letters. Among the many reasons for such a belief is that nearly one-third of the Greek vocabulary found in these letters is absent from the other letters of the New Testament, even those undisputedly written by Paul.

I name these two aspects of the Pastoral Epistles – that they were written to a larger audience than Timothy and Titus, and that Paul was not the author – to highlight a key component to the scriptural text as we prepare to look this morning at 2 Timothy 4.

Since these texts are being written after Paul's death in the mid-60s, we know that over 30 years have passed since Jesus' death and resurrection. The Pastoral Epistles are being written as the second generation of Christian believers are being raised in the still young Christian movement. Though written in the first person, as if told by Paul himself, the author who is writing is writing to a new generation – in a new context of Christian life. These letters highlight teachings that were needed even beyond the first generation of Christianity.

Because of this second-generation mentality, I find a special significance to these texts. These Pastoral Epistles do not contain foundational stories, like the Acts of the Apostles, which simply tells the story of the early Church. These are reactionary stories, written like sermons today in response to the good, the bad, and the ugly that the Church has experienced in our past to claim a more faithful present.

With that in mind, let's look to 2 Timothy 4.

2 Timothy 4:6-18 offers a farewell speech. In verse 6, Paul's death is foretold, as it is written, "I am being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come." He is, like old man, reflecting back on the preceding years of his life.

A couple weeks ago, I visited Mrs. Doris Carscaddon as she was celebrating her 99<sup>th</sup> birthday. (She's here today, so I have to change some of the story so as not to get myself in trouble!) ... As we were reflecting on her 99 years (knowing there are plenty more to come!), one of the observations she made was that, at 99 years old, everyone seems to listen to you. While people may not always agree with someone who is 99, there's a level of respect inherent in having lived nearly a century, which allows a 99 year old to tell their stories without having anyone argue with them. You don't tell a 99-year old they are right or wrong, you just sit in awe as they recount the stories of their life, and they have a lot of stories to tell.

This is the kind of story being told here in 2 Timothy 4. Though Paul isn't quite 99, he is the undisputed leader of the early Christian movement. In those first 30 years of the Christian Church, Paul was the definitive voice for faithful living, and he helped birth more new faith communities in the Mediterranean region than anyone else in those early years. The story, as he is telling it, is not to be argued with, but simply to be heard and understood.

From the posture of one who knows he is nearing the end of his life, Paul reflects back, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Using the verbiage of military engagement and long distance running, Paul acknowledges that life and faithfulness have not always been easy. His work was not like a Sunday stroll through Founder's Park. There were challenges to overcome, conquests to be won, and an intentional decision to not give up.

When Jen and I first started dating, she had just begun training for her third marathon – which was to be the Philadelphia marathon. I remember her saying to me in those first weeks of our relationship, "If you want to spend time with me on the weekends, you're going to have to run with me, because I spend a good amount of time training with long runs on the weekends." I am decidedly not a long-distance runner, but I was interested in spending time with her on the weekends, so I too started running. And we ran the Philadelphia Marathon together that November.

I learned two things about marathons that year: first, I would never – absolutely *never* – do that again. And second, that running a marathon, save for a few Olympic-qualified athletes, is not really about what place you come in, it's about finishing. It's about preparing your body for 26.2 miles of continuous movement, which can take 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7 hours ... because the timing isn't what matters, finishing is what matters. Training for a marathon is about preparing your body to deal with fatigue, exhaustion, pain, hunger and thirst as you simply try to reach the finish line.

I'm convinced this is why Paul doesn't say, "I have *won* the race;" he says, "I have *finished* the race." Paul knows that faithful living, like that first marathon in 490 BCE when Pheidippides ran from the battle of Marathon to Athens to announce victory, isn't about being first, it's about never giving up and finishing the race.

And Paul knows, as the letter will articulate next, that there are plenty of reasons why one might choose to give up.

In verse 9, there is a shift. Paul is no longer talking about his death or the impending end of his life, he begins to reflect on some of his past encounters. "Demas," he says, "in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia; Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me." In these closing verses, we are told that six of Paul's seven companions have left him.

At first read, it doesn't seem like there's much to make of this. While some of these names are of people we don't really know, they are all thought to be close confidants of Paul. These are people, like Timothy, who were trained by Paul to be leaders in the early Church. It might be that these leaders have left because they have pulpits to fill – they have churches to lead and sermons to write. But, as Paul continues in verses 16-18, it appears that something more unfavorable has taken place.

In verse 16, it is written, "At my first defence no one came to my support, but all deserted me."

It becomes clear, these leaders of the early church haven't just returned to their congregations, they've abandoned Paul in his time of trial. When Paul was brought before the Roman court, no one was there to defend him. Like Peter on the night in which Jesus was arrested, Paul's colleagues chose to slip into the crowd rather than stand up for their fearless leader.

As I was reading this text – again, acknowledging that this is not believed to be Paul's writing, but a future generation's reflection on Paul's life – I couldn't help but think of our own generation. The preacher, anonymous though they might be, who is writing this text seems convinced that even the greatest of early Christian leaders – like Paul himself – were at risk of being left behind by those who were believed to be their closest confidants and allies.

Christianity is not as persecuted today as it was when this text was first written, so we might not have to fear standing up to the empirical powers on behalf of the Christian Church in the same way as Paul; and yet, I have had many conversations in recent years with some of you, and with many beyond these walls, about how alone it feels as a Christian today speaking up on behalf of God's love in this world, specifically as that love demands justice, and equity, and reconciliation.

It feels as if the Christianity that is most visible and vocal in this nation today is the one that reflects the powers of the Roman empire that were oppressive to the early Church, not the Christianity of the early Church, which challenged the powers of the empire. Demas, who is criticized in this text for abandoning Paul, is said to have left Paul because he is “in love with the present world.” Understand that “the present world” is not offered in contrast to “the past world” which needs to be made again, but instead as the opposite of “the future world,” which is the full presence of the kingdom of heaven to come.

And, while Christians from many backgrounds and upbringings might claim they are being abandoned today, to discern who is aligned with Paul and who is aligned with Demas, we can surely distinguish who is seeking the powers of Rome. Who is seeking the love of the present world, and who, conversely, represents the world Paul envisioned as defined in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, where resources were shared for ensuring no one in the community went hungry or unhoused, and where the Church stands in solid opposition to the murderous ways of the empire.

I take some encouragement knowing that, even for Paul in those early years, even for a generation that could still remember the physical presence of Christ, the work of the early Church was not always embraced. We are not the only generation of Christians who have been challenged by the lure of cultural norms that lift up individualism and personal wealth in contrast to the focus of communal well-being, which is laid out time and again in the historic Judea-Christian sacred texts.

But even more encouraging are these final words in this morning’s text. Having named that he had been deserted by some of his closest confidants, we read in verse 17, “But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. ... The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom.”

The author is bringing back to the forefront of the Church’s mind an eternal promise that God has long maintained with the faithful. As was proclaimed in the TORAH (back in Deuteronomy), “The Lord your God goes with you; God will never leave you or forsake you.” “In the end, the gospel in Paul’s words to Timothy lies in his assurance that, withstanding the trials of life, those who follow Christ are ultimately never alone, but rather are accompanied by the One in whose presence they will find rescue and haven and hope.”

We live in an age of complicated faithfulness. But, we are not unique in having to deal with such challenges. Even in the early days of the Church – as early as the first and second generation of Christian discipleship – the lure of the world had already begun to pull people away from the promise and invitation of God in Jesus Christ. Paul’s life makes clear, the selflessness of discipleship will not always be rewarded by *worldly* renown. The path of faithfulness may be lonely at times. But we do not journey alone. We have a running partner in the marathon of discipleship who will lead us and sustain us along the path. And, thanks be to God, the promise is that at the end, the arc *does* bend toward justice, new life and peace *will* win out, the joy of salvation and new life *are* final.

So be encouraged, and hold fast to the hope, for the glory of God shall be proclaimed, and the love of God made known. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Raymond F. Collins. *I & II Timothy and Titus*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.