

Paul, Timothy and Troubled Times

We spent the past couple of Sundays talking about what to do when the foundations crumble. Last Sunday we focused on a passage from 2 Timothy, “Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm.” A word of encouragement for all of us. As I read Paul’s letter to Timothy, I felt it held some clear instruction for us, the church in 2021, in what is a troubled time. So turn to 2 Timothy and let’s see what we can learn.

Recall from last Sunday, Paul is writing this letter to Timothy while in prison in Rome. He is awaiting a trial but is certain he will be found guilty and sentenced to death this time. He tells Timothy the time of his departure, his death is at hand. These were troubled times for Paul but also for Timothy and the church as persecution was spreading throughout the empire and false teachers were infiltrating the church and deceiving believers. Paul gives Timothy, and the first century church, and us, some clear instruction for what to do in troubled times.

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my dear son. Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.” 2 Timothy 1:1-2

Paul speaks of himself as an apostle. An apostle was considered one of the twelve, one who had been chosen by the Lord and who had seen the risen Christ. Paul makes this claim because of his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus where Jesus appeared to him and said, “I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you.” Acts 26:16

Paul says his calling, his conversion, his apostleship is by the will of God. There is nothing about his early life or his past history that would cause anyone to imagine Paul would become an apostle and follower of Jesus Christ. Paul had persecuted the church and yet, God’s will and God’s ways are above our ways. He doesn’t say it this way, but I think Paul’s instruction to Timothy for dealing with troubled times would include this admonition: **Trust in the sovereign will of God and rest in God’s grace, mercy and peace!** Have you lost your peace in the last few days or weeks or months? God has grace, mercy and peace for you and you receive it as you trust in his sovereignty!

Much has been said about the will of God in the last few months. Preachers and so called prophets made all kinds of claims and predictions about what God’s will was concerning the

presidential election. All kinds of prophetic words and dreams about what would happen and yet most of it never happened. Where is the will of God in all of this?

Obviously God's will is not carried out all the time, whether in national elections or legislative actions or in our daily life. God wants us to act in ways that please and obey him and all of us fail at that, often on a daily basis. God's will is that we (fill in the blank) but we didn't so his will isn't carried out and it's our fault. But what about on a grander, greater scale? I think it is fair to say there is the will of God in a command and we have the choice to obey or disobey his will, but there is also the sovereign will and purpose of God; God's sovereign governance over all things, on a bigger, greater, ultimate scale. Don't overlook God's sovereignty!

We are convinced we know the will of God in everything. "God doesn't ever want us to suffer." Ever? The Bible says, **"It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."** **1 Peter 3:17**. Apparently, there are times when suffering somehow fits in the plan and purpose of God. Paul challenges Timothy in this chapter to "join with me in suffering for the gospel." "What about God's will for a nation?" In the Old Testament, Daniel had been carried off into exile in Babylon, trying to figure out what the will of God could be in what had happened to him and the destruction of Jerusalem. Daniel said, **"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them."** **Daniel 2:20-21**. Exiled in Babylon serving a pagan king, was that the will of God? It wasn't the outcome Daniel wanted, but what did he do? He remained steadfast in character and commitment, prayed three times a day, refused to compromise or bow to the idolatry and sin of Babylon. As a result of Daniel's godly influence, Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king said of the God of Israel, **"He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'"** **Daniel 4:35**

Determining the will of God is sometimes a complex thing. Life and death, obedience and disobedience, good and bad choices, and then you factor in God's sovereignty and his ultimate plan in the march of time towards Jesus' return and eternity. There are preachers and prophets telling you they are speaking for God, telling you exactly what God is doing. I'm not one of those and time and experience tells me to be very cautious. We get glimpses of things this side of eternity. I don't know for sure what lessons God is teaching the church, or America. I'm pretty certain it isn't just about America or the American church, it's about God's kingdom and

his purposes being fulfilled worldwide. Perhaps it isn't about knowing what God is doing in the earth or in America as much as it is about knowing what we, the people of God, are supposed to be doing in the earth to bear witness of Jesus, regardless of politics or pandemic! Here is what I know after 65 years of living on this planet: wisdom and peace are found in trusting the Sovereign God of the Universe. He has a way of causing all things to work together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose. Trust him. We may not see it now, or in the near future, or maybe we won't understand until we get to heaven, but we can choose to trust and obey him, even in the darkness of our experience, even when we don't understand. What we need to do is stop cursing the darkness and be the light he called us to be as he works his will and his purpose in our circumstances. The church is still called to be the church, regardless of national politics! Daniel was called to be a Hebrew and to live like it, even in Babylon. We are called to live holy lives and proclaim Jesus and the full counsel of God's word, regardless. Trust in the sovereign will of God and rest in God's grace, mercy and peace!

“For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. 2 Timothy 1:6-7

In the face of troubled times, Paul tells Timothy to **Fan into flame the gift of God**. Paul may be referencing Timothy's ordination as a minister. We don't know if he is reminding him of a particular spiritual gift like teaching or administration, or simply referring to the gift and call of God to be a minister, to carry out and fulfill his ministry. For us I think it serves as a reminder of our responsibility to be intentional about our spiritual life, to keep the fire stoked and burning brightly in our relationship with Jesus and in his purpose for our life.

In the pandemic, with half of the church joining us online each Sunday and half here in person, with periods of quarantine for some, for everything being out of balance, off center somehow, we must be intentional about our walk with God. Don't allow the fire of our love and passion for God and for worship, for service to God and to others, don't allow that flame to go out. It will if you don't pay attention, if you don't remain diligent about feeding your soul and spirit, if you don't add fuel to the fire. Fan the flame! Keep the fire hot!

Paul reminded Timothy that God has given us a spirit not of timidity, not of drawing back or retiring, of just sitting idle, but of power, love and self-discipline. Don't say, "I just can't seem to get going, to serve the Lord, to pray or study God's word." He has given us power to choose

to obey the Lord and his word. He enables us to make wise choices, to walk in obedience, to choose the way of love. We have his power and we are to exercise self-discipline, to say yes to God and no to sin, no to compromise, no to evil! Power, love and self-discipline.

Troubled times call for self-discipline, for war time choices, for a willingness to sacrifice for the Lord and on behalf of others. Troubled times call for a reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit. We can't do this on our own. Stir up the gift of the Holy Spirit in your life. Increase your prayer time. Pray in the Spirit. Increase your time in reading and meditating on the Word of God. Troubled times call for us to increase our love and devotion to God and to others. Let your love be in word and in deed. Examine your heart, your devotion to the Lord, your relationship with God in this season. Is the fire burning hot? Take action before the fire goes out. Fan into flame the gift of God in your life! Here is the last thing.

In troubled times, **Keep testifying about Jesus and his saving grace.** Paul writes, **“So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” 2 Timothy 1:8-10**

Paul invites Timothy to share in suffering for the gospel and then he expands on the gospel, on the good news. It's the message of salvation, the power of God to save us and call us to a holy life by his grace and bring us to eternal life. Three aspects of salvation Paul refers to: Forgiveness, holiness and immortality.

Believe the gospel, the good news about Jesus, that he died for us on the cross, bearing the penalty for our sin in his own body, then rose again, defeating death and ascended to the Father where he rules and reigns, offering forgiveness and life to all who believe and turn to him. In salvation, God pardons and forgives our offenses and accepts us as righteous, clean and holy in his sight through our faith in Jesus. We call it justification. He will forgive your sins!

Salvation is pardon and forgiveness for sin but it also includes that work of the Holy Spirit by which we are progressively transformed from who we used to be into the image of God's Son, into the image of Jesus. We call it sanctification. In 2 Corinthians Paul speaks of us being changed into the likeness of Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit, changed from glory to

glory. The fruit of the Spirit is produced in our life; our life and our choices reflect the very nature of Christ which we now share by his saving power. That's holiness in our practice, evidence of salvation, evidence of a new life in us because of a new birth in Christ Jesus.

Finally, in speaking of salvation Paul refers to life and immortality. Jesus conquered death and his salvation gives us eternal life, immortality where we will live with him forever. Salvation means by faith we are and will be ultimately, completely, saved, given a new body like his and we will dwell with him forever. We call that glorification.

Thank God for this glorious salvation that is ours through Christ Jesus: sins forgiven, living a new, holy life with a promise of eternal life with him! What an opportunity, in troubled times, to let the whole world know there is still hope. Jesus still saves. 400,000 people in America have died, millions grieving, but there is a hope that is stronger than death. You can know Jesus and his saving grace and you won't have to fear a virus or trouble or persecution because Jesus has conquered death and has promised eternal life to all who trust him and believe. Hope in a troubled time. Forgiveness in a troubled time. A holy life and holy choices to be made with courage and boldness in a troubled time.

The song writer said, "In times like these we need a Savior, in times like these we need an anchor, be very sure, be very sure, your anchor holds and grips the solid rock, this rock is Jesus, yes he's the one, this rock is Jesus the only one!" If Jesus isn't Savior and Lord and the rock to whom you are anchored, I invite you to open your heart and come to him today! In a troubled time, he is the only sure and certain hope and Savior! Let's pray!

May the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace!