

Tough Friends for Tough Times



THE APOSTLE PAUL understood the importance of friends—and especially the importance of friends during tough times. Years earlier while he was ministering in Macedonia, he became so exhausted by external conflicts and inner fears about the work and about the relentless fact that his body had no rest that he became “downcast” (2 Corinthians 7:6; “depressed,” as the *New American Standard Bible* translates it). Times were tough, and his discouragement was substantial. “But God . . . comforted us by the coming of Titus.” It was not things that brought him comfort. It was the touch of Titus, the loving encouragement of a trusted friend. And the effect was priceless, indeed golden. Titus relayed the affirmations of other friends, and so Paul said, “I rejoiced still more” (v. 7). Titus modeled a ministry that God’s people so need today. It would do the church great good to meditate on those beautiful verses in 2 Corinthians 7:5–7.

Here in his second letter to Timothy, Paul has already praised the Titus-like ministry done for him by Onesiphorus (1:16–18). After Paul’s arrest, most believers in the province of Asia, where Ephesus was located, deserted him, including leaders like Phygelus and Hermogenes (1:15). But excellent Onesiphorus traveled to Rome and “searched for [Paul] earnestly”—treading the back alleys of Rome, knocking on doors, asking suspicious questions. And once he found Paul, “he often refreshed me.” Despite the danger, Onesiphorus returned again and again to Paul’s dungeon and ministered to him. Onesiphorus was there for Paul when neither the sun nor the moon shone on his friend.

Now, in the mud of the dungeon there was no evidence that Paul was depressed. On the contrary, the preceding paragraph in 2 Timothy is a triumphant declaration that as he looked through the bars, he saw not the mud but the stars. Nevertheless this was a tough time for Paul, perhaps his toughest. And Paul knew the importance of “tough friends for tough times”—the importance of Christian relationships to Christian continuance. So the old apostle took charge of his relationships at the end. He became intensely directive and called the shots from his death cell with four explicit orders.

Come Quickly (vv. 9–11a)

The first directive was that Timothy drop everything in Ephesus and come immediately to Rome: “Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me” (vv. 9–11a). Paul’s motivations were several.

Beloved Timothy. Overarching was his father-son love for Timothy. Paul began this letter by calling him “my beloved child” (1:2), followed by an emotional retrospect: “As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy” (1:4). The memory of Timothy’s tearful love made the dying apostle’s heart ache for his presence. Timothy was the son Paul never had. He was his soul-son.

Paul’s insistence that Timothy come “soon” was demanding, to say the least. The journey would take Timothy four to six months over land and sea—mostly land—by way of Troas (cf. v. 13), Philippi, the

great Egnatian road to Dyrrachium, and then across to Brundisium and on to Rome.¹ Paul was counting on the slow, grinding pace of Roman justice to allow Timothy to beat the apostle's appointment with death. The journey would have to be made as quickly as possible despite its inherent dangers.

Some have criticized Paul for this, saying he was selfishly putting his own needs above that of the church, especially the troubled Ephesian church that Timothy was attempting to help. Obviously they neither understand the depth of relationship between the two men, nor the fact that Paul had important truths and strategies to impart to Timothy—which could only be communicated in the give-and-take of extended personal exchange.

Paul's armchair critics fail to understand that this event marks the end of the initial era of Christian mission, and that what Paul would impart would be essential to the future health of the church universal. They also fail to note that trusted Tychicus was being sent by Paul to Ephesus (probably with this letter in hand), where he would serve as Timothy's replacement.

Disappointing Demas. The critics also do not give enough weight to the depth of the apostle's isolation and the need of tough friends for tough times, which is embedded right here in his own words—"For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica" (v. 10a).

Demas had splendid potential. In Paul's earlier prison letter to Philemon, Paul honored Demas by referring to him as a "fellow worker" along with the likes of Mark and Luke (v. 24). He was part of the inner circle, in close communion with these other greats. Demas was a spiritual man of substance. Accordingly, in Paul's letter to the Colossians, he is included as one who sends greetings—"Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas" (4:14). Demas wasn't a lightweight, and he had been with Paul in many ups and downs. But this time the situation in Rome was apparently too much for him. Paul was not under house arrest as before but was in the infamous Mamartine prison, on his way to a sure death for sedition. So Demas packed his bags and took off to Thessalonica.

There is no suggestion here that Demas became a heretic or apostate. Calvin writes:

But we are not to suppose that he completely denied Christ and gave himself over again to ungodliness or the allurements of the world, but only that he cared more for his own convenience and safety than for the life of Paul. He could not stay with Paul without involving himself in many troubles and vexations and a real risk to his life; he was exposed to many reproaches, he was laid open to many insults, he was forced to give up caring for his own concerns, and in the circumstances he was overcome by his dislike for the cross and decided to look to his own interests.²

Demas had no intention of quitting his Christianity. In fact, there was a healthy body of believers in Thessalonica, and that is where he went.

Paul's assessment that Demas was "in love with this present world" does not make him a villain, but merely a man, so much like us, who came into disgrace by a well-worn path. Demas did not want to lose his Christianity, but it hurt to keep it.³ Love for "this world," or "this present age" as the Greek literally reads, takes many shapes, depending on who and where we are. It could be shaped as comfort or take on the form of wealth or come in the contours of fame or advantage or the love of specific things.

Perhaps Demas never truly counted the cost. It may be he did not understand that when we come to Christ, we will face troubles because we will always collide with the world. Or it may be, as William Barclay has suggested, that "the years have a way of taking our ideals away, of making us satisfied with less and less, of lowering our standards. . . . There is no threat so dangerous and so insidious, as the threat of years to a man's ideals."⁴ There is not a single soul that is not swayed by the lure of comfort. And the older we get, the more alluring the siren songs are. This is the short-sighted temptation to love the present world instead of Christ's appearing (cf. v. 8).

Demas' departure devastated Paul. Your deepest hurts can only come from people you love, your deepest disappointments from the destruction of your deepest hopes. What a bitter pill this was for Paul. I can testify that over years of ministry the greatest heartaches have not come from enemies but from those who began so well, who raised my hopes high, only to become lovers of this world rather than lovers of Christ.

The mention of Demas reminded Paul of two other departures that no doubt had Paul's blessing—"Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia" (v. 10b). Both of these had likely gone out on missions. Dalmatia was across the Adriatic Sea, and Galatia across the Aegean. Titus was the one who had given Paul the healing touch in Macedonia and whom Paul came to call "my true child" (Titus 1:4). It was right and good that these two men had gone out. But their absence heightened the apostle's need for Timothy.

Dependable Luke. Some might read "Luke alone is with me" (v. 11a) as a disparaging aside. But that was not so because Luke was the antithesis of Demas. He too had been with Demas during Paul's first imprisonment (cf. Philemon 24). He too was included in the greeting to the Colossians and was given the beautiful description, "the beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14). But Luke was a tough friend for tough times. He was with Paul in prison from the first time to the last. He was Paul's biographer, and the "we" passages in Acts indicate that he was with the apostle during some of the most difficult times. Acts 27, for example, which records Paul's being taken to Rome for the last time, is a "we" passage. Luke was there!

Luke was not only Paul's Boswell—he was his traveling physician. He tended Paul's ailing bones and doctored the "thorn . . . in [his] flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7). His cultured Greek style has not only given us the book of Acts but the most theological of all the Gospels. Perhaps as Paul wrote his final epistle, he was concerned for Luke who had to shoulder not only care for Paul but also many other details while in Rome. Likely, Luke was Paul's secretary for the writing of 2 Timothy and penned the personal, self-effacing "Luke alone" with a wry smile.

Paul is so intensely directive here. Timothy must come running from Asia—an intercontinental sprint. His arrival will form the heart of a tough team for the apostle's final days on earth. Paul knows what he needs and is not afraid to voice it.

Bring Mark (vv. 11b, 12)

Paul's second directive to Timothy was to "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry" (v. 11). Mark had been a remarkably advantaged young man. His mother's home had been one of the centers of the Jerusalem church, the home to which Peter came when the angel delivered him from prison (Acts 12:12). John Mark had known all the apostles since boyhood. So when Paul embarked on his first missionary trip John Mark accompanied him as a helper on the campaign through Cyprus. But for some unknown reason he left Paul in Pamphylia and went home (Acts 13:5, 13).

Paul considered this nothing less than a desertion. And later when Barnabas wanted to let John Mark accompany them on a subsequent journey, Paul would have none of it. The argument between Paul and Barnabas was so sharp that Paul took Silas and went one way, and Barnabas took John Mark the other (Acts 15:36–40).

We have no record of exactly what happened to Mark afterward, but evidently the time with Barnabas was a time of healing because we find that Mark was again with Paul during his first Roman imprisonment: "Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas" (Colossians 4:10). Paul also called him a "fellow worker" (Philemon 24). Significantly, Mark also became a veritable "son" to the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:13).

And now Paul, in his time of greatest need, called for John Mark—"Bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry"—meaning the ministry of the gospel, though there is probably also the idea of "personally helpful to me."⁵ Mark had rocketed from uselessness to usefulness!

There is also this beautiful fact: John Mark, the missionary dropout, became St. Mark, the writer of the great action Gospel that emphasizes the servanthood of our Lord. And Mark was just the right man to write it.

What profound encouragement we find in the life of John Mark. Past failure, even rejection, does not prevent present usability. You can come back from disgrace. Not only that, you can become immensely useful to Christ. Even a shirker can become a major worker in the gospel enterprise—the kind of man or woman that the apostle would call for.

In a few months Luke, Mark, and Timothy are all going to be gathered together for Paul's departure. *That* is a tough team for tough times!

Bring My Necessities (v. 13)

Paul requested certain items he considered necessities: "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments" (v. 13). Paul had probably been forced to part with his cloak in Troas after his arrest. Since it is cold in Rome and getting colder, he asked for this necessity, later adding, "Do your best to come before winter" (v. 21).

In asking for his "books, and above all the parchments," Paul was emphasizing that it is "the parchments," the animal-skin, precious vellum codices, that he especially wanted. Certainly this was a reference to a copy of the Old Testament Scriptures, and possibly some books containing his own personal notes.⁶ Some scholars speculate that the parchments may have contained copies of the Lord's words or early narratives of his life.⁷ Drew University's Thomas Oden asks some intriguing questions:

Could they have been early Christian documents, perhaps collections of sayings of Jesus or early versions of Christian preaching or Old Testament exegesis? Could these have been the materials Luke and Mark used later to put together their Gospel accounts? . . . We do not know, but it is not a completely implausible hypothesis, in my view, that they contained early Christian literature—either of Paul's own manuscripts or of sayings of Jesus or fragments or primitive accounts of the Lord's life antedating the four Gospel writers. . . . Was Paul deliberately interested in a written record of Christ's life? Would not this be consistent with the central theme of the Pastorals—to guard the deposit of the gospel?⁸

Intriguing speculations!

Watch Out (vv. 14, 15)

But we do know that three important commodities were coming to Rome in the next few months, all set to arrive on the same day—Timothy, Mark, and the Scriptures! Each of these involved dangers of one kind or another. Thus the final directive: "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message" (vv. 14, 15). The harm likely came from Alexander's informing on Paul because that is what the Greek suggests. Alexander, in fact, may have been the direct cause of his arrest.⁹ So Timothy and Mark must be on their guard against him.

It is clear what Paul was up to in giving such explicit directives for his final days on earth. If Timothy and Mark arrived before his execution, this may be what happened.

Strengthening. They first gave themselves to strengthening Paul. What a group of encouragers they would have been: "The beloved physician," Luke, who had always been there from the beginning and was absolutely devoted to Paul, knew the apostle better than anyone in the world. And he loved him as he loved himself. Timothy, whose early tears for Paul had so refreshed him, was Paul's spiritual son, so full of filial love, so sensitive and kind. Then there was Mark, the successful failure with such a Spirit-

developed humility and a desire to serve. Oh, how Paul was strengthened for death! But it was also a two-way street because if they were there to the end, Paul would have shown them how to die. His “departure” (v. 6), his final pouring out (v. 6), went beyond words in steeling them for the future.

Theologizing. Can you imagine the theologizing that went on as these four heavyweights pored over the parchments? Together they sought out Christ in all the Scriptures (cf. Luke 24:25, 26, 44–46). They were amazed at and meditated on Jesus’ use of the Word. They learned and rejoiced together.

Strategizing. Paul was the missionary general of the apostolic church, and they were his colonels. “Luke, after my death, you go to such and such a place. And, Timothy, here’s what to do in Ephesus. Mark, stay close to Peter.”

Perhaps they even strategized about writing. After all, the three of them wrote more than half of the New Testament! Did they discuss the Gospels that Luke and Mark later wrote? If so, what advice did Paul provide?

Tough friends for tough times! That is what we need. And that is what we must be.