

# Trusting for Life

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Union Congregational Church, Quincy, Illinois - September 27, 2009

## 2 Timothy 1:1-14 NIV

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.

I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. 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.

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. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you — guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

---

One day, about a year ago, many Americans suddenly learned that they had a lot less than they thought they had. Perhaps they had purchased a home for, say, \$250,000. Now the real estate market had tanked, and that house might bring \$150,000 if anyone could afford to buy it! And the homeowner still owed the lending institution far more than the home was worth. Other Americans found that funds they had deposited in a bank were in jeopardy, because their bank had failed and couldn't cover their deposit. Still others, who had invested in corporations once thought to be rock-solid, discovered that their investment was now worth pennies on the dollar. And then there were those with 401-K retirement accounts who discovered that overnight their 401-K had become a "201-K" due to the collapsing stock market.

If it's painful for you to be reminded of these events, you need to know that I share your pain. We've been dealing with a couple of similar situations, ourselves. It's not fun to find out that institutions, or people, that we trusted to look out for our interests were unable, for one reason or another, to live up to that trust. Events and trends in our national and world economy had been going on for years leading up to this crisis. Only a handful of voices had been raised in warning, and those voices were ignored. Bad decisions by leaders in government — decisions motivated more by politics than by perspicacity — contributed to the crisis. Opportunists in business, government and other key areas violated the public trust, resulting in a meltdown of our financial institutions from which we are only now beginning to recover. It has been painful. It has not been fun. And to top it off, there was the well-known case of Bernard Madoff, who "made off" with millions of his investors' dollars until his Ponzi scheme caught up with him.

Against such a background it's interesting to read the words of the Apostle Paul to his young protege, the missionary-pastor Timothy, in Second Timothy chapter 1. The usual translation is, "I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." Another translation of the Greek here, and the one the New International Version seems to follow, puts this statement into starkly financial terms: "For I know whom I have *trusted* [with my resources], and

I am sure that he is able to *safeguard my deposit* until that day.” Of course, Paul is talking about the Lord Jesus Christ, and it’s not only that Paul was persuaded that Christ would preserve what he had committed to Paul; it’s also the case that Paul trusted Christ to safeguard, and bring to maturity and fruition, *that which Paul had invested in Christ*. It was a considerable investment of life and labor, and one that cost Paul his physical freedom, for in verse 16 he refers to the chains of his imprisonment in Rome, from where he is writing.

Paul’s statement is instructive: “For I *know* whom I have trusted . . .” That’s where so many of us made our big mistake. People didn’t really *know* much about the institutions, or in some cases the individuals — such as Mr. Madoff — with whom they had deposited their resources. Most of us were ignorant of the forces at work behind the scenes, and even those trends that were readily apparent, that would result in the crisis. The prophet Hosea declared, in the name of the Lord, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6). The events of recent months are a good instance of the destruction that ensues when people don’t know enough about that in which they’ve placed their confidence.

The prophet was speaking not of knowledge in general, of course, but of knowledge of the Lord in the sense of a personal relationship with him. And so was the Apostle Paul when he said, “I know whom I have trusted.” He makes that clear in what he writes next to Timothy: “Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us” (vv. 13-14). The indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ is that which we are to “know,” in the most basic sense, and Paul signifies this further by the expression “in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” *Faith* and *love* are both relational words; they refer to a commitment we have to a Person.

Faith is not “a train of ideas in the head,” as John Wesley put it — not mere belief in a set of facts but a personal trust in one whom we know. It’s a commitment to that person, as someone we have faith in, someone we can rely upon. As my father used to say, when preaching, “You may believe that I can drive a car, but faith is getting in and riding with me.” Something similar is true of *love*, probably the most misunderstood word in the Christian vocabulary. The kind of love the New Testament describes, known as *agape* in the Greek, isn’t a warm feeling or sense of attraction to somebody. *Agape* in the New Testament is based on the Old Testament concept of *hesed*, or loyalty to a covenant relationship. The Lord loves, or is loyal to, those who have entered into covenant with him. *Such love is not unconditional*; it’s conditioned on our remaining faithful to that bond with the Lord, and if we step outside that covenant we’ve stepped outside the perimeter of the Lord’s covenant-love. But as long as we keep that faithfulness, we can appeal to the Lord for help based on his loyalty to us in turn. As David cries out in Psalm 51, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your covenant-love,” or *hesed*. It’s not on the basis of God’s generalized benevolence toward everyone that David can make his appeal, but on the basis of that bond of loyalty. And the same is true for the New Testament believer: we can rely upon the Lord because “we know whom we have trusted” — because he’s established an agreement, or covenant, with us in Christ — and not just because he bestows his blessings indiscriminately upon whomever happens to ask him for a favor.

But, to use Microsoft’s terminology for computer geeks, there’s also a certain “knowledge base” involved in trusting the Lord with our deposits. Paul alludes to that in the words we have just read: “Follow the pattern of the *sound words* which you have heard from me . . . guard *the truth* that has been entrusted to you.” There is a specific content, or “knowledge base,” to that deposit, what the Apostle Jude calls “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Working backwards through our passage from 2 Timothy, we see that Paul refers to that deposit as “the gospel,” and that it comes from Jesus Christ himself. Go with me back to verses 8-10:

*Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

I was sitting in church a month or so ago, waiting for the service to begin, and opened my Bible at random to this passage. It struck me as a somewhat unusual way of describing the gospel, the “deposit” or “knowledge base” of our faith. Usually we hear the gospel presented in a basic form such as, “Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins.” But that’s not the way Paul puts it to Timothy here. He gives the gospel a rather different nuance: Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light.” It’s not just that Jesus *paid the penalty for our sin* — he *defeated death*, which Paul calls “the wages of sin” (Romans 6:23).

This is another way of looking at what Jesus has done for us. Theologians call it the *Christus Victor* theory of the atonement, compared to the *ransom* theory. Both ideas are in Scripture, but somehow preachers haven’t always paid attention to this *Christus Victor* perspective. Paul gives voice to it elsewhere, for example in Colossians 2:13-15:

*He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*

Think of this image Paul paints for us! It’s not Jesus being nailed to the cross, bearing the weight of our sin by that *excruciating* form of Roman execution. Instead, Jesus holds the mallet and the spikes, and is *nailing to his cross the decree that condemned us to death*, making fools out of those powers that had it in for us!

We have all sinned; in some way we have all ignored the Lord, and turned side from his blueprint for human life. On that, Scripture is abundantly clear, as you all know; I don’t need to belabor the point by citing chapter and verse. And sin comes with a cost. There’s a price to be paid for going our own way, and the ultimate price — as Paul reminds us — is death. But, following what Paul is saying here to Timothy, it’s not just that Jesus “took the rap” for us, or by his death on the cross he “bought God off.” Rather, through his resurrection Jesus Christ has removed us from the whole *system* that was bringing us down, so that we could live — so that we could exult with the singer of Psalm 118: “I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done” (Psalm 118:17).

In a remarkable passage from Ephesians 1 and 2, Paul gives another expression to this thought. He writes of

*. . . the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in*

*mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions . . .* (Ephesians 1:18–2:4).

So, coming back to our text, Paul reminds Timothy that God’s original purpose for his people — those who are faithful to their covenant with him — has now been revealed in “the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Jesus, in his coming to us as Son of God and his resurrection as the Christ or Messiah, has disclosed the life God intends for all his faithful people to live. Therefore, in Romans 8:29, Paul refers to Christ as “the firstborn among many brothers,” and in Colossians 1 he says, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy” (Colossians 1:17–18).

There is too much theology here to elaborate this point any further. Lengthy volumes have been written on this topic, such as *The Resurrection of the Son of God* by the British scholar and bishop N. T. Wright, a massive tome of 817 pages that I worked my way through a few years ago. I just want to summarize the point this way: When Paul reminds Timothy, “Of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher,” he’s referring to the gospel of Christ who “brought life and immortality to light.” That gospel, and the commitment we make to it, are the deposit we can trust Christ to safeguard until that day when the life of the risen Christ comes to fruition in us.

And for the faithful Christian that life is continually coming to maturity, just as Paul says: “I have been crucified with Christ and *I no longer live, but Christ lives in me*. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Literally, in Greek the text reads “I live by *the faith of the Son of God*.” It is *Jesus’ faith*, or faithfulness — not ours — that brings us life through the gospel.

We have to wind this up, but one final thought. If Jesus comes to us as the Revealer of life, a life we share with him is we belong to him, then Christianity might be something different from what we have assumed it to be. Our faith isn’t a set of doctrines or beliefs; rather, *Christianity is Jesus*, a Person who lives in us, and in whom we live. This gospel is his deposit with us, and our deposit with him. And because we *know him* we can trust him to make it effective in our experience, as we share in his resurrection.

You and I may be struggling with some life issues. Perhaps they are relationship problems, they could be problems with health or finance, or they might be issues of our understanding and acceptance of ourselves. Or maybe we have to deal with our own complacency about our spiritual state, or our indifference to the teachings of our faith. Whatever you’re dealing with, would it make a difference to you to realize that, as a Christian, you’re not the one dealing with these things? “You have died,” Paul says, “and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3 RSV). You’re living in the resurrection of Christ.

You say, “Pastor, I don’t *feel* like I’m living this resurrection life with Christ. I *fear* I’ve a long way to go to get to that point. How do I make it *real* in my life?” Back up again with me through our passage from 2 Timothy, to verse 7: “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” There’s nothing here about feelings, or about fear! Instead, Paul speaks of “power, and love, and self-discipline.” For the Apostle Paul the bottom line here is *self-discipline*; another translation says *a sound mind*.

There are things we can do to move to a higher plane of living in Christ. We can discipline ourselves to reject *fear* of failure or *feelings* of inadequacy, because we know it’s not we, ourselves, who create this new life within us. It’s the Spirit of the Christ of God; as Paul told the Philippians, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good

pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13). The “work” we have to do is to let go of ourselves and let the Lord work in us, and sometimes that’s the hardest “work” of all for people who live in a culture that exalts the self. It takes self-discipline to “let go and let God,” as the saying goes. Jesus himself put it this way: “The work of God is this: to believe in [that is, to trust] the one he has sent” (John 6:29).

Transitioning to that higher plane of living also requires us to develop “a sound mind.” We take on a new perspective that sees the world as God sees it and not as we’ve been trained by our culture to understand it. Will we take off the dark glasses and look at reality the way the Scriptures view it? I call it “cutting the unbiblical cord,” and it really is a kind of rebirth, the rebirth Jesus spoke of when he said, “You must be born again.” When you start looking at life that way — when you can say, with Paul, “For me to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21) — then great things begin to happen. Because you are *in Christ* who has been raised from the dead, you now live as you have never lived before.

Sermon text ©2009 Richard C. Leonard  
Bible text © as applicable