

People, People Everywhere (2 Timothy 4:9-22)

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[0 : 00] And I don't know about you, but often final words are important words. Winter is approaching, he's cold, he's lonely, he's been saying such weighty things as you've been discouraging, so bold and clear and urgent, fighting the good fight, finishing the race, the crown of glory, preach the word, all scriptures inspired, all amongst his final words.

And now it's as if Paul is kind of scratching out the final pieces of this letter. And we can kind of imagine the prison door scraping along the floor and as it opens a local pastor comes in. Someone who's visited Paul often in prison, he's a trusted friend. And he grabs a stool across the room, drags it up close to where Paul is sitting.

His face fills with empathy, his eyes kind of glisten with tears as he draws near to his friend. And he leans forward and asks, so Paul, how do you really feel? What's really going on in your heart after all this bold stuff that you've been saying?

[1 : 51] And these are beautiful verses because it's as if Paul pulls back the curtains of his heart and lets us in and to see what is really going on inside.

And so this afternoon I want us to just observe a couple of things together about what we see as Paul pulls back the curtains of his heart.

First is this, that Paul carries lots of people in his heart. All these names that are here. It's easy to rush over them, but no, no, they're important.

His heart is crowded with people. There's people, people everywhere. The passage is awash with people.

Let's try and cluster them together into different groups. That might help us see them better. There are, firstly, those whom he loves as his own children.

[3 : 00] Like Timothy. Remember chapter 1 starts off with Timothy, my dear son. Verse 2. And here in chapter 4, verse 9.

Do your best to come to me quickly. Verse 21. Do your best to get here before winter. Hurry up, Timothy. You can sense the urgency and the desperation here.

Paul is missing Timothy. It's like he is his son. And today, you know, we may gravitate towards words like mentoring or coaching or all good words.

But with this love that Paul is expressing, there is something fundamentally parental about it. Leadership love is parental love.

It's the same brand. And actually, in Paul's letter-writing ministry, it frames it. In his very first letter, in 1 Thessalonians, his very first letter opens up in chapter 2 with, Oh, how I came among you as a father and like a mother.

[4 : 18] And now here in his last letter, years later, to Timothy, he closes down his letter-writing ministry with this longing to see Timothy, my dear son.

Who else is here? Well, there are those who have deserted him, like Demas in verse 10.

From earlier letters, we know him to have been a faithful co-worker for Paul. But not anymore. In that clash that is always there between choosing the values of this world and choosing the values of the world to come, Demas had finally made up his mind.

It will be this world, thank you. And he was off. He just abandoned them. Verse 10. For Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.

Such strong words. Loved and deserted. And don't miss the four at the start of the verse.

[5 : 36] The longing for Timothy is caused in part by the desertion of Demas. Because Demas has deserted me.

Timothy, please, come. Come quickly. And these are strong words. The deserted word, well, the experts are confident that Psalm 22 is on Paul's mind.

Which is also the psalm on the lips of Jesus on the cross. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? And with the loved word, it's actually the very same word used just up in verse 8. If you look there, one moment, Paul is speaking of those whose longing, whose love is for Christ's appearing. Thank you. And then just a few words later, he's using exactly the same word, very deliberately.

Not about someone longing for Christ's appearing, but about Demas and his longing and his love for this world. And so you'd expect with final words like this, that there's some deep feelings in play here.

[6 : 55] And there are. Then another group. There are those with whom he shares responsibility. His teammates, his co-workers.

Those who share in their sense of cause. So Titus to Dalmatia. Crescens to Galatia. Tychicus to Ephesus. Erastus and Corinth.

Priscilla and Aquila. On and on and on it goes. All of them. People whom Paul trusted, delegated, empowered, and released into extending the gospel with him and then beyond him.

I don't know about you, but just reflecting on my years as a leader. I think this sharing, this team building, this multiplication, this kind of bringing on of the next generation.

It's just such a great joy as a leader. The Apostle John writes in one of his letters that there's no greater joy than seeing your children walking in the truth.

[8 : 07] Well, this joy might be number two. Watching those children in the faith stretching and growing as they step into new responsibilities.

And yet, my observation would be, as I travel, is that a besetting sin across the cultures of the world is the inability to draw the next generation into leadership alongside.

Again and again, it's a problem. Leadership is kind of seen to be a bit like a ladder. And the ones in leadership are up on the upper rungs, looking down at the lower rungs, saying, you just wait your turn.

And that's not how Paul functioned. What really needs to happen is for the ladder to be turned into a relay and the rung to be turned into a baton and allow the sense of passing it on and allowing new generations and drawing them into leadership.

I have a leadership team for who I try to care and serve. And you know, for 13 years now, Barbie and I have never had the opportunity of having any of them in our home.

[9 : 37] And hospitality is a big thing for us, like many Asian cultures. Never had any of them in our home. It's a sadness that we feel.

But in December, this changes. When Dwi Maria comes to New Zealand, I remember her in a little group of learners, a small group in Bogor in Indonesia, 15 years ago, doing the basic training that we offer.

Last month, I was in Sydney as she gathered her team members, all 17 of them, as she's gone on to become the director of our work in Asia and the South Pacific.

And just sitting in the back row watching her lead, I was purring like a cat. It was just such a joy to see her coming on and becoming such a key and strategic leader.

Who else can we find here? Well, there are those with whom Paul has a restored relationship. Look at Mark in verse 11.

[10 : 53] If you read the book of Acts, Mark got into trouble with Paul, actually, back in the first missionary journey. Some sort of failure took place, some kind of relationship breakdown.

And Paul lost confidence in Mark. And he didn't continue with him. But look at this, verse 11, the second part.

Get Mark and bring him with you because he is helpful to me in my ministry. Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful sentence.

A restored relationship. The one who had failed had grown and become useful and become wanted again.

I've just finished this brick of a book. Carried it all around the world with me, actually, in my hand luggage.

[12 : 02] I just got lost in it. It's had such a big impact on me. It's the book about a leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

A church planted in the first century by this very same mark in 2 Timothy 4. It's a church in Egypt that has existed continuously down through all the centuries.

That, on its own, makes me interested. But this Corillus, or Cyril, was their patriarch through the 1960s, so quite recently.

And this was his, this is the way he led, ironically. Like, Mark was the founder of the church, and now he's, treats people a bit like what Paul is doing here.

At one point, let me just give you one little example. At one point, he is faced with a corrupt young priest. So what does he do? Banish him?

[13:10] No, he, he brings that corrupt priest to come and live with him for six months. Takes so much criticism from people.

But this is how the writer puts it. It was not the reputation of the priest that concerned him, but rather healing him. Corillus refused to turn a blind eye to the corruption, but neither was he willing to forsake the corrupt priest.

And he went on to become a very significant leader in the Coptic church. church. It's so easy to discard marks today.

It's one of my own challenges in leadership. It's so easy to kind of erase people or kind of cancel them and move on. But some of the sweetest relationships in leadership are restored relationships. After all, if we don't have reconciliation, what actually do we have with the gospel? And then another group, those who oppose him.

[14:30] And this is Alexander there in verse 14 in your Bibles. Lots of speculation about who he is. We don't really know, but we do know two things. The opposition is personal.

He's done a great deal of harm to me. And the opposition undermines the gospel. He strongly opposed our message. This enemy, this person is an enemy of Paul and of the gospel.

He's a dangerous piece of work. This Alexander is different from Mark. And this Alexander is still at work, still a threat. Watch out, Timothy. And then there are those who are his friends like Luke. Only Luke is with me, verse 11. And then all the people in Rome, down in verse 21. Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia, goes on and on.

I just love the way it ends. Eubulus greets you, so do Pudens, Linus, Claudia, and all the brothers and sisters.

[15:37] The named and the unnamed. The core and the periphery. Each of them and all of them are there supporting and greeting Paul.

So, that's a bit quick, but this is the thing. In his final days, Paul is carrying a lot of people in his heart. 17 and more in these few verses.

Now, most of us here tonight are much younger than Paul, nearer the beginning of life and leadership than the end. but we're all leaders.

You know, we are all influencing others to some degree and if we haven't tasted these sorts of situations yet, we will.

Loving people as our own children just bursting out of us, feeling deserted by people, abandoned by them. William and I were sharing a name that fits that for both of us and the sadness that that brings.

[16:42] Sharing responsibility with them, the teammates and the kindred spirits, enjoying a restored relationship with them, the power of reconciliation, enduring their ongoing opposition, the pain and the anxiety and the stress, and then being so grateful for their friendship and their support.

the kind of pickup where you left off people in our hearts. You know what I find with all of these people, even the ones that are more positive, the ones that are more negative, is that I find it all takes time.

It all takes emotion and it gets exhausting when there are people, people everywhere in our lives. when I was at Cary some years ago, managing that emotion, that exhaustion was really a big challenge for me.

But I'd meet every month with the board executive and they were very kind and supportive. And one morning in a little cafe just behind Westfield in Newmarket, I can still see it, Martin, one of them drew a bathtub on a napkin for me.

[18:05] Still with me. And on that bath he put a tap and a plug hole. And then he said to me, Paul, if life and leadership is to be sustainable for you, you need to get the flow right.

it's no good having more going down the plug hole than there is coming through the tap. You'll drain all the way to empty.

As you can see, I've never forgotten it. It still lives with me. And while there are people, people everywhere in this passage taken together, they can drain the bathtub. bathtub, there is more going on in this passage. There are other people in this passage. Well, one other person to be exact.

So often missed. In fact, in training preachers, as I do with Langham, we often go to a passage and get people to observe different things in the passage and we always ask them, observe all the people in the passage and write down everything you can about them as a starting point.

[19 : 22] And it is uncanny. It is uncanny. Across languages and cultures, there's always one person who's the last to be seen, if they are seen at all.

It's uncanny. Everyone does this. Yes, Paul carries lots of people in his heart, but also Paul carries lots of the Lord in his heart.

The Lord is mentioned three times. So easily missed. In verse 14, the Lord will repay. In verse 17, the Lord stood by my side.

And verse 18, the Lord will rescue. Let's just take a closer look at these. Verse 14, as Paul faces opposition, he knows that the Lord will repay.

We're back with Alexander now. It's like God is the great and final accountant. he will balance the books in his time and in his way.

[20 : 45] I wonder whether today in Atero and New Zealand we actually think like this anymore. In my early years with Langham, I went to Cambodia a lot.

I don't know if you know some of the history there, but in the 1970s, Pol Pot's regime lasted for five years, during which basically the entire country became a concentration camp.

30% of the population were killed and 90% of the church. Some in the training had lived through those years.

You could see it on their faces. Jesus. And in our training, we focus a lot on trying to help people see the single story of the Bible. The Bible is written over hundreds of years by dozens of authors, and yet it's one story.

It's amazing. And so in our training every afternoon, late in the afternoon, we'd go bit by bit through each of the story and over the whole week convey something of that single story.

[21 : 52] And so, yeah, they were very quiet. very respectful, very passive, not really engaging much in discussion, quite hard as a trainer with a translator to get them going.

And on the Thursday evening, we reached the end of the story. Someone else is taking it, I'm sitting off to the side and at the back, and we reached kind of the big repaying at the end, the final judgment, and the people start cheering.

clapping, almost stomping their feet. I'd never witnessed anything like it before.

Because when people live under oppression, they talk, sometimes even sing, about their hope in the judgment of God.

And this helps them to endure. we see it in the Psalms. We see it in African American music. It's not actually that uncommon. But when people live in reasonable comfort, what becomes the judgment of God?

[23 : 10] Either we forget about it, or we get scared by it, or we say things like, how could a loving God be like that, and overlook the fact that he's also a God of justice.

Paul's living in a different world. First up, God's judgment is very real to him, whether it's very soon or very much later. A judgment that is sure is happening, that God will punish the bad and vindicate the good on that last day.

In fact, something really interesting in this passage, just bear with me for a bit. In verse 8, just the verse before we read, the judgment of God towards Paul is talked about as awarding me on that day, vindicating him.

And then in verse 14, the judgment of God towards Alexander is about repaying, as we just saw. And you know what? The word Paul uses both times is exactly the same.

Exactly the same word. It's about the judgment. In one context, it's a reward. It's an award. It's vindicating the good. And then in another context, it's punishing the bad.

[24 : 34] Then let's move on. Where else does the Lord appear? Verse 17, as Paul faces abandonment, he knows the Lord is by his side.

People have deserted him. He feels alone, but he isn't alone, we read. The Lord stood by my side and gave me strength. There Paul is, maybe, probably chained to a soldier standing beside him,

and the picture of being abandoned, and yet this conviction, this capacity to see past the soldier to the Lord standing beside him and giving him strength.

He could have said something a bit more bland, like, God is helping me. No, he says the same thing, but with this unforgettable image, the Lord standing beside me, a presence, quiet, assuring, a compassion, compassion, but more than that, standing beside him and strengthening him as well. And you know what's so lovely here is that the experts reckon that this reference to the Lord is a reference to Jesus himself. So as Paul approaches his death, he finds Jesus being for him exactly what Jesus himself didn't have as he approaches his death, a companion.

And who better to have standing by his side than the one who himself was abandoned on the cross, the one who really can say, I know how you feel, and I'm here for you.

[26 : 23] Jesus is standing there, the Jesus of the cross and the resurrection, with the story and power to make a difference.

You know, it's really easy today to feel that because people have abandoned us, God has abandoned us.

And that's just not true. He may feel like he's absent, but we know he's not, don't we? He may, a bit like the sun, slip behind the clouds and not be seen for a while, but the sun is still there behind the clouds, still having an impact.

And if you're walking in God's ways, and you encounter an experience of abandonment or betrayal by a colleague or a friend, a parent, an employer, then the Lord is there still.

He is standing by your side to give you strength. I used to travel to Hong Kong a lot, lots, for the training.

[27 : 45] People would come down from what we call the BC, the big country. And one year, an artist from Beijing was among the participants, and on the final day, he asked each person for a favorite verse.

And then he stayed up all night, all night, writing them out by hand. And here's the one he did for me. And it now sits in my study, and is very precious.

And the verse I chose was 2 Timothy 4, 17, which goes like this, but the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength.

And then a final mention of the Lord is soon after that, as Paul faces suffering, he knows that God will rescue him. Might not be immediate, imminent, it might not be imminent, but it will be ultimate. And this seems to be the sense of I've been delivered from the lion's mouth before, God has done that for me in the past, and if it doesn't happen in my present, it will happen in my future, and that is enough.

[29 : 09] the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. See, with people, people everywhere, it's actually the Lord, knowing the one who rescues, the one who stands by his side, and the one who repays, this is what makes the difference for Paul, this 18th man, if you like, the Lord.

This is what pours out of the tap to help make up for what's going down the plug hole. So much so, incredible, that we read that the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it, the mission of God.

Verse 18, the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack, bring me safely, to him be glory forever and ever, the glory of God, amazing, in prison, near the end of his life and he's still focused on the mission of God and the glory of God.

This is what animates him in his last words and his last hours. I like to think in pictures just the way my mind works and so with this passage, what comes to mind is a photo with a frame.

The photo itself is loaded with people 17 and more, emotion and drama and pain and joy, all very human in the photo.

[31 : 08] And then there's the frame, the well-chosen frame that brings out certain colors, that encloses everything in the photo and completes it, setting the human drama within a divine perspective.

So that when it gets hard in life and hard in leadership, we're persuaded that the one who repays, the one who strengthens, the one who rescues is there.

And so we can also get up and engage again in the mission of God or the glory of God just where he's placed us tomorrow.

The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you, each one. Thank you.