

Witnesses of God's Suffering

*For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in mercy
to all those who call upon You. Psalm 86:5*

God will allow us to be in difficult situations. We must set our minds to meet the challenge or we will often give up. Timothy was in a difficult situation in Ephesus when Paul left him there to finish the ministry God gave him to do. He was pastoring a church in a city largely given over to worship of Diana, the pagan love goddess of the Greek world. Surrounded by so much spiritual darkness, the church at Ephesus was being infiltrated by false teachers with false doctrines, much like the church today.

Paul had left the Ephesians with **sound** doctrine - the teachings he had received from Jesus and the Old Testament. Now he was concerned that Timothy made sure they continued in that doctrine. He wasn't worried that Timothy would begin teaching the wrong things but that he would allow others to spread strange beliefs. Paul knew Timothy had to stand firm against difficult people and command them not to teach false doctrine. Paul once again affirmed that the law cannot bring righteousness - only the glorious gospel of God can. Paul felt it was his responsibility to guard and preserve the gospel, and pass it on to Timothy and others. In the next verses, Paul speaks of his own personal experience with the gospel.

READ I Timothy 1:12-14

Paul said that his ministry was enabled by the Lord. Christ gave him the strength and power he needed. He didn't try to stir up the power or find it in himself. God enabled him. So much of the world's thought today tells us to look within ourselves to find what we need - that we have all of the answers in us. This is not true. We find our answers in God and His Word; it is God in us that gives us the things we need. God doesn't really look for talent or ability - He looks for availability and then enables the person to do the work He has called him to. Paul also said God counted him faithful. We don't have to be smart or gifted to be faithful; faithfulness is something down-to-earth that we can do right where we are: we don't have to wait until we are more mature. We can be faithful now in even small things the Lord calls us to do. "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10) The word "ministry" is nothing complicated either. It simply means "service" - to work hard and serve.

"Although I was formerly" - Paul's sinful past did not disqualify him from serving God. He was a "blasphemer" - he had insulted, reviled, and cursed both Jesus and the church. He was a "persecutor" who stood there holding Stephen's coat while he was stoned to death. He was so angry at Christ that he set out to wipe the Lord's name off the face of the earth. Saul was a violent man who despitely used others. He enjoyed brutality and causing others pain. Not content with words of insult, he went to the limit of legal persecution. When Saul was on the road to Damascus from Jerusalem, he carried letters authorizing him to imprison those who believed in Jesus Christ. However, it was on that road, as he was breathing out murderous

threats, that the Lord got a hold of his life. And God's mercy and grace were more than enough to cover his past and enable him to serve God. Likewise, when we have repented and received forgiveness, we should never feel that our past disqualifies us from being used by God. The enemy will always try to convince us that we are not worthy so we must learn to resist his lies. It is likely that one reason Timothy might want to leave his ministry in Ephesus is that he thought he was unworthy or incapable of the work due to his young age and inexperience. Paul told Timothy, "if anyone should have been disqualified it should have been me! Yet God found a way to use me and He will use you here in Ephesus." With these words, Paul gave Timothy a reason to remain.

READ I Timothy 1:15-16

That's the gospel! That's the good news! "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*" All men are sinners, no exceptions. Romans 3:23 tells us, "*All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.*" We are all alienated from God because of our sin. But Jesus came to save all men, no one is excluded. There is no sin so great that God cannot forgive it. Paul called himself the "chief of sinners", feeling his sins were worse because he was responsible for the death, imprisonment, and suffering of Christians. In Acts 26:11, Paul explained to King Agrippa what might have been his worst sin, "*And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*" Saul compelled others to blaspheme Jesus. To destroy their bodies was not enough for him: he went even farther forcing them under torture to renounce the Jesus whom they loved. He relentlessly hunted Christians down even to foreign cities. Saul was zealous in his persecution of Christ's followers. Why does he mention that here? "*However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all long-suffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.*"

A man as bad as Paul had received mercy. That means the door is open to others, no matter how great the sin. The Lord chose the most unlikely candidate and saved him. Think about if you were living then and saw the young zealous Saul. You saw how much he hated the church and all Christians and heard his blasphemy against Jesus. You would have thought that he was the last person in the world that would ever be saved - there was no hope for him. But Paul says God chose him to show how long-suffering and merciful God is - to encourage others to seek God no matter how bad their sin. God is willing to reach the lowest and Jesus will forgive the worst.

A lesson for us from this is that often we categorize some lost people as unreachable and don't really invest time and energy in sharing the gospel with them or praying for them. We need to remember that no one, no matter how bad we think they are, is beyond God's reach. He loves them in spite of their sin just as He loved us when we were still in our sin. God calls us to pray for the salvation of all who are lost no matter how we feel about them. Instead of writing them off, we need to write them down on our prayer list and faithfully pray for them. Here, God used Paul as a pattern (example) to show that no one is beyond God's redemption.

READ I Timothy 1:17

This outburst of praise showed that Paul *knew* God and *loved* Him. Thinking of who he had been and how bad he was, and how God had saved him caused Paul to praise God.

The King Eternal - ruling and reigning in complete power and glory through all the ages, those past and those to come

Immortal - existing before anything else existed; incorruptible: he cannot die

Invisible - not completely knowable by us; beyond our total comprehension

God who alone is wise - He is God - we are not! He knows everything.

When we consider who God is, how can we not give Him all glory and honor, forever and ever? This description of God should have given Timothy another reason to stay in Ephesus. This great God was worthy of Timothy's service and would empower him to complete the work there.

READ I Timothy 1:18-20

"*Charge*" here is a military word referring to an order from a commanding officer. So Paul is serious in what he's saying to Timothy. However, he addresses him as "son Timothy" letting him know he gives this order in fatherly love. He's telling Timothy to "jump into the midst of the battle and fight the good fight." Apparently Timothy needed to be recharged. He was facing the critical issue of false teaching in the church but shrinking back from it. God's call was that he was to "fight the good fight." The job in front of Timothy was going to be a battle and he needed to approach it as a soldier; timidity would not work.

His weapons would be faith and a good conscience to protect against doubt and condemnation. Timothy had to have faith that God was in control and would guide him as Timothy continued to seek Him. He had to have a good conscience because his enemies would be attacking him; if Timothy had not conducted himself rightly, they would have good reason to attack. A good conscience is connected with doing what is right, exhibiting good conduct. Paul mentions that some have rejected these weapons - notably faith. Those who reject what Jesus and the apostles taught are headed for shipwreck (ruin). He mentions specifically the "shipwrecked" faith of two: Hymenaeus and Alexander. Hymenaeus taught the false doctrine that the resurrection of believers had already taken place. (II Timothy 2:17) Alexander was probably the coppersmith who opposed Paul and did him a great amount of harm. (II Timothy 4:14) They had veered off course, away from sound teaching, and drifted into the dangerous rocks of false doctrine. They had wrecked their faith. Interestingly, the word translated "rejected" in verse 19 is a nautical term meaning "thrown overboard." Hymenaeus and Alexander had tossed out the good conscience that comes with proper belief—in other words, they loved sin. The "ship" of their faith, not having the ballast or balance it needed, went out of control and wrecked. So those who accept false teachings and ignore their conscience will suffer spiritual damage, like a ship that hits the rocks and is broken up.

Paul disciplined them for their disobedience by "delivering them to Satan so they will learn not to blaspheme." This means he removed them from the church and sent them back into Satan's world where they belonged. It was done with the hope that this punishment would bring

them to their senses: shock them into realizing what life was like without the Lord's protection. Hopefully it would cause them to repent and come back to the Lord. Paul was not being vindictive or evil in sending them out of the church.

Dwight Moody once said, "You have to preach a person into hell, before you can preach them into heaven." In other words, a person must know he has a problem before He can come to God for the solution. If a person who is living in rebellion toward God is allowed to go on thinking that everything is OK, this is an evil act toward that person. It may seem compassionate at the time, but it is not."

Paul's actions were a pattern for Timothy to show how false doctrines in the church must be dealt with before they completely divide the body and cause confusion. Paul was stirring Timothy to be bold and take action in the church when it was needed. This is a lesson for us as well.

Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.
I Thessalonians 5:21