The next day, an assassin shot Dr. King dead. Like Dr. King, the apostle Paul sees the specter of death, but his impending demise in no way distressed Paul, for remember that it was Paul who wrote that for him “death is gain” (Philippians 1:21). The year is A.D. 67 when Paul writes his letter to Timothy from a prison cell, where he awaits an audience with the emperor Nero against charges of disturbing the peace. The gospel which Paul preached loudly and often, a gospel of love and grace and allegiance to a higher authority, did not sit well with his Roman overlords. Paul was not stupid, nor did he have a death wish; he knew peaching Christ’s gospel would be unpopular, but he preached it because he knew it to be the truth. Sensing his time slipping away, Paul said: “The time of my departure has come,” and “I am already being poured out as a libation” (2 Timothy 4:6).

Nero’s reign began in A.D. 54, and it had not been a smooth ride. The Great Fire occurred in A.D. 64, during which Nero was famously, if erroneously, accused of “fiddling.” (Fiddles didn’t exist until the 11th century.) The fire consumed 70 percent of the city, and the Christian community was targeted by mobs seeking to blame outsiders or foreigners for the catastrophe. Church tradition says that the apostle Peter fell victim to this mob violence and was crucified head down. Now, three years later, Paul would lose his life to the executioner’s sword. So, quite quickly, the young church lost its two greatest apostles.

But the church was not without leadership: a second generation of preachers and pastors stood ready to carry the torch. One of these was Timothy, arguably Paul’s favorite and most devoted disciple. It is Timothy to whom Paul addresses his parting words. Paul mentored Timothy in the fundamentals of faith. Timothy served with Paul in Ephesus for three years and was with him on Paul’s travels to Troas, Philippi, and Corinth. Now Timothy is the pastor at Ephesus, and Paul’s last words are ones of encouragement to him: recharge your batteries; do not apologize; hone your teaching skills; and protect what you have.

**Recharge your batteries.**Paul uses the word “rekindle” (v. 6a), meaning to re-light the blaze when the flames are dying, or the fire is burning low. This is the third year of a pandemic. We understand how energy, passion, and enthusiasm can wane. We know the experience of passing through days, weeks, months of tedium and world-weariness. Some days the spirit is flagging, and the fuel is low. We are simply going through the motions.

To rekindle the spirit, Paul suggests that Timothy find some tinder and light a match. One way the fire may be restarted is by remembering that it first burst into flames “through the laying on of hands” (v. 6b). Paul reminds Timothy that the community of faith validates our gifts for ministry, supports our efforts to spread the gospel, and assures us that God is with us.

There are days when we feel insecure, fearful, or timid in our efforts. Some days we wonder if we are doing the right thing. On those “doubt-days,” it is good to hear Paul’s words: “For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice” (v. 7a). Paul and Timothy saw more danger in their lifetime than most of us will ever face; now, Paul tells Timothy that living for Jesus requires courage, not cowardice. Paul also reminds Timothy of his Christ-given keys for success: power, love, and self-discipline (v. 7b).

**Don’t apologize.** In the film *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, Capt. Nathan Cutting Brittles (played by John Wayne) advises: “Never apologize, mister, it’s a sign of weakness.” Paul says we need never apologize for our faith or for giving “testimony about our Lord” (v. 8). The gospel of Jesus Christ is the life-saving truth the world needs to hear! Jesus witnessed to the love and grace and mercy and compassion of God. His life of love and service to others ran counter to the culture, but Jesus never apologized for doing what was right. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, befriended women and Gentiles, which scandalized his friends, but he did it anyway and without apology. He died on the cross, the innocent for the sinful, to the bewilderment of his disciples and the religious authorities, but he died with purpose and without regret.

Jesus did nothing of which he was ashamed, or that we might consider shameful. So, there is no reason to be embarrassed when identifying ourselves as his followers. We *might* be ashamed by the behavior of some who call themselves Christians; so was Paul, who despaired of Demas who loved the world more than he loved Jesus (v. 10). Paul urges Timothy to present himself as one approved by God, to be “a worker who has no need to be ashamed” (2 Timothy 2:15). We need never be ashamed because we “know the one in whom [we] have put [our] trust,” and we know that he is able to protect us in uncertain times (v. 12). Not much is certain anymore, but God is trustworthy, and Christ Jesus takes care of our eternal investment. No need to apologize!

**Hone your teaching skills.**“Hold to the standard of sound teaching,” Paul writes (v. 13). Four essential words here: hold, standard, sound, and teaching. Sound teaching is so crucial that Paul suggests that it be firmly grasped. We may decide to loosen our grip on other things, but we must hold tight to sound teaching. We must guard against those who would rob us of the truth or convince us of something other than Christ’s gospel. And not just teaching itself, but the “standard” of sound teaching. Some translations say the “pattern” of sound teaching, which is better, because it suggests that true teaching has a certain repetition; a pattern that is practiced throughout life and is detected by the discerning heart. When we live into God’s truth and practice our faith in Christ-like ways, it is noted by others.

The lessons of faith should be “sound,” meaning they should be persuasive, rational, and shared humbly to appeal to all persons. Paul mentioned “sound teaching” in his first letter, urging Timothy to “have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives’ tales” (1 Timothy 4:6-7), but instead to teach the gospel truth with persistence and in ways that “convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience” (2 Timothy 4:2). Paul knew a “time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths” (4:3-4). Paul had good reasons for urging Timothy to sharpen his teaching skills.

**Protect what you have.** “Guard the good treasure God has given you” (v.14). Christ’s Gospel is that treasure. Paul said earlier: “Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you” (1 Timothy 6:20). What Timothy has is the Gospel, his faith, and his ministry: these things define him. They define us. Paul says, in effect, “Don’t do anything that might compromise your faith or your mission, or which may set you on a course that veers from God’s Truth. Follow your True North, which is Jesus Christ your Lord.”

Recharge your batteries. Do not apologize. Hone your teaching skills. Protect what you have. These are Paul’s parting words, encouraging Timothy to take up Paul’s mantle, to live a life of daring discipleship. Church tradition indicates that Timothy did precisely this: he was bishop of Ephesus for many years. In A.D. 97, at age of 80, Timothy attempted to halt a pagan festival in honor of the Greek goddess Diana. In response to his preaching, the angry crowds beat him, dragged him through the streets, and stoned him to death. In his dying moments, Timothy maybe recalled the words of Paul: “Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:3). Like his mentor, Timothy fought the good fight, finished the course, kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7). May there be more like him among us.

Prayer: Inspiring God, thank You for the epistles of Paul and for this final letter to Timothy. I praise You for the wisdom and grace that is shared in its pages. Thank You for those in my life who taught me the glorious gospel of grace, and for those who are younger in the faith whose lives impact mine. May I hold fast to the truth that I learned, give encouragement to my brothers and sisters in Christ, and develop the qualities of faithfulness, fortitude, and forbearance, as I make my way through this increasingly cruel and ungodly world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Sources:

* “Saint Timothy.” Catholic.org. Retrieved March 21, 2022.
* Edward Le Compte. Dictionary of Last Words (Philosophical Library, 1955).
* William Brahms. “Last Words of Notable People: Final Words of More than 3500 Noteworthy People Throughout History.” Reference Desk Press, Inc (October 19, 2012).

**Parting Words**

Sunday, October 2, 2022 [2 Timothy 1:1-14](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Timothy+1%3a1-14&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In his novel, *The Old Man and the* Sea, Ernest Hemingway quipped: “Every day above earth is a good day.” Which is very true! Any day that you can wake up and put your feet on the floor and have a cup of coffee and share a laugh and learn something is a good day. But sooner or later our days “above earth” are over, and as we depart this world for the next, our friends and family often take great care to note our last remarks and thoughts. Here are some famous last words:

* John Adams, 2nd President of the United States, lamented, “Thomas Jefferson still survives.” Unbeknownst to him, Jefferson died earlier that very day, July 4th, 1826.
* Marie Antoinette, last queen of France, graciously said, “Monsieur, I beg your pardon,” after stepping on the toes of her executioner on the way to the guillotine.
* Benedict Arnold, the Revolutionary War general and turncoat, regretfully said: “Let me die in my old uniform. God forgive me for ever putting on any other.”
* The poet Emily Dickinson mysteriously declared: “I must go for the fog is rising.”
* British Prime Minister and brilliant orator Winston Churchill uttered a rather humdrum, “I’m bored with it all.”
* Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone and a workaholic to the last, lamented “So little done; so much to do.”
* Surgeon Joseph Henry Green, checking his own pulse, stated simply: “Stopped.”

But perhaps the most famous last words are those of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, predicting with clarity an ominous future:

“I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So, I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”